Death's Breath

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Summary

Harry Potter and Draco Malfoy are both back at Hogwarts for their eighth year. Since his past still haunts him, rather than becoming an auror, Harry decides to pursue teaching and becomes the assistant to the new D. A. professor. Everything is going as well as could be expected for him (besides the nightmares), at least until he realizes that the potions he brews or takes are acting oddly.

Draco Malfoy is having a terrible year, plagued by the ghosts of his past, the hostility of his present, and the uncertainty of his future. If only Potter could stop being in some kind of trouble for just one single year.

Chapter 1: Prologue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Candles floated under the starry ceiling of the Great Hall, bathing the tables in a gentle glow. On the surface, everything seemed exactly the same as it had been when Harry himself had first come to Hogwarts. After a closer look, though… Hushed whispers, drawn, nervous faces, and the gaps where dead students once sat painted a very different picture. There had been a war, after all. Harry remembered his first feast. Had he really been as tiny as the current first-years?

“Blimey, they're small, aren't they?” Ron muttered, seeming to read Harry's mind.

“Yeah,” Harry muttered back.

He tried to keep his mind on the good memories, but the bad managed to sneak through. Harry pushed them away. He remembered the sweets, conversations, and laughter of his first Halloween Feast. They’d fought the troll that day.

Trolls, swinging their clubs during the battle of Hogwarts, smashing walls and attacking students.

No, not that. Hogsmeade trips! Wandering the village, buying sweets and drinking butterbeer…

Hogsmeade, dark and abandoned. Aberforth Dumbledore letting the trio into his tavern. Neville, beaten up and bruised.

No, no, *no*. Hogsmeade was *fun*. Harry remembered throwing mud at Malfoy while under the invisibility cloak, the hilarious look of confused fear on his face.

The terror on Malfoy's gaunt, pale face as Voldemort ordered him to cast crucio. The terror on Malfoy's face as he teetered above the fiendfyre in the room of requirement. Malfoy, lying in a pool of his own blood in Myrtle's bathroom.

Harry glanced over at the Slytherin table and saw that Hermione had been right. On the train, she’d said that out of the Slytherins, only Malfoy, Zabini, and Parkinson had returned for their eighth year.

Other than them, Harry knew for sure that the Patil twins, Seamus, Dean, Susan Bones, a few Ravenclaws including Terry Boot, and of course, Neville, Ron, and Hermione, were all back.

Malfoy was sitting to the side, by himself. He looked better than when Harry had seen him last, but that wasn't saying much. He was still paler than usual, and his already thin face was hollow and ravaged.

Harry realized he was staring and quickly looked away.

He couldn't shake the uncomfortable feeling that he was being watched. People were gesturing at him and whispering his name. Harry tried to ignore it.

"Which of them d'you reckon is the new DA teacher?" Ron asked, gesturing toward the teacher's table.

Two unfamiliar people sat among the staff. One was a rather young woman with long, silky black hair and brown skin. Her purple robes were fashionable and well-tailored. The other was a man with crooked teeth and constantly moving fingers.

"I don't know," Harry responded.

McGonagall began the sorting. It was strange to see her up there instead of Dumbledore. Harry watched, once again saddened by the small number of children. So many seats at the tables were empty.

One of the first names McGonagall called was "Boot, Eleanor".

"That's Terry Boot's sister," Hermione whispered in Harry's ear.

Eleanor Boot was a little girl with huge eyes and long black hair in two braids. She smiled ear to ear as the sorting hat was placed on her head. For a few seconds, the hat deliberated.

"Slytherin!" the hat announced.

The Great Hall went quiet. The only scattered claps came from the Slytherin table, a few people here and there, and from Terry Boot himself. He set his jaw as he looked around the room. Harry frowned. She was a first-year, she'd done absolutely nothing wrong, yet barely anyone was clapping. Why? Just because she'd become a Slytherin? Harry himself had almost been sorted into Slytherin.

The look of helpless confusion on Eleanor's face decided it for Harry.

He stood up and began to clap loudly. Hermione joined in with renewed vigor. More and more people began to applaud, until a blushing Eleanor was getting a standing ovation from the entire room. Harry sat back down, satisfied. While *he* was at Hogwarts, he wouldn't let anyone feel unwelcome. McGonagall met his eye and nodded. As Harry watched Eleanor walk over to the Slytherin table, he saw Malfoy watching him with an unreadable expression.

The rest of the sorting passed. Every student got a round of applause, no matter the house.

McGonagall introduced the new Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, Diya Thrushton, and the new Transfiguration professor, Timothy Twiddle. The two of them each said a few words about themselves. Professor Thrushton was a half-blood witch who had spent the last few years traveling Asia. She had been invited back by Professor McGonagall herself. Professor Thrushton didn't speak loudly, but she had a commanding presence. Professor Twiddle was also a graduate of Hogwarts, but he was a muggleborn. He'd spent the last decade in Austria. He spoke very quickly, making jerky motions with his hands to accompany his words.

“It’s very honorable what you did, Harry,” Hermione complimented when the teachers sat down. “It’s stupid to exclude someone just because of their house.”

Harry prepared himself for a lecture about the house system, but Hermione was interrupted by the appearance of food.

Harry loaded his plate. Mrs. Weasley’s cooking was amazing, but it didn’t have the same taste of happy childhood memories as Hogwarts food did. Maybe it wasn’t the food, but just being at Hogwarts again. The feeling had a bittersweet tinge to it. Harry found himself longing for his childhood days. The days when he could sleep peacefully.

Near the end of the feast, Professor McGonagall cleared her throat.

“This year, I expect all students to treat one another with kindness and respect. If I find out about someone being made to feel unwelcome at Hogwarts, the consequences will be severe for whoever the perpetrator may be.”

Ron pointedly looked in Malfoy’s direction.

“That being said, there will be two important changes made this year. One is temporary, that being the presence of the eighth-years. We are

happy to welcome them back to complete their education."

People began to clap. Professor McGonagall waited for them to finish before continuing.

"The other is a permanent change. Classes will no longer be grouped by house."

This statement caused an uproar. Hermione looked like the only one who was happy with the words. Ron's mouth hung open. Harry frowned in surprise, waiting to hear more.

"Houses will remain in existence," McGonagall assured. "Students will live in their house dormitories, quidditch matches will continue as they always have, and the house cup will be awarded at the end of each year. However, classes will be assigned randomly, regardless of your house."

Ron looked a bit happier after hearing this, but still made a face.

"Slytherins in every class," he groaned.

"*Ronald*. We've had plenty of classes with Slytherins. Besides, it doesn't matter what house someone is in," Hermione chastised.

"Look at it this way. At least there won't be as many Slytherins at once," Harry said in an attempt to cheer Ron up.

Hermione looked at him with a mix of exasperation and gratitude. Ron did look somewhat more cheerful. Harry himself wasn't sure how he felt about the change. It didn't affect him much, now that he was an eighth-year.

"Good thing quidditch is still going," Ginny whispered in Harry's ear. Harry nodded. It occurred to him that he may not be able to play quidditch this year, and to his surprise, this didn't upset him much. He simply couldn't bring himself to care. He hoped Gryffindor got a good seeker.

McGonagall continued talking, explaining the houses to first-years. Harry stopped listening to what she was saying. He looked up from his food when cheers erupted all around.

"What did she say?" Harry asked.

"No classes tomorrow. We're getting career consultations, and the

first-years will get a tour of the school," Hermione filled in. She was so focused that she forgot to scold Harry for not listening. Harry turned to his food again as Hermione started to mutter about all the classes she wanted to take.

Career consultations. Harry remembered McGonagall's office on the day that he had told her that he wanted to be an auror. Could that be his future?

Harry imagined chasing a dark wizard with his wand out, shooting curses and hexes. The wizard in his imagination blocked them and kept running through a tunnel, or was it an alleyway? The walls loomed closer and closer, finally opening into a familiar graveyard. The wizard turned, cloak flaring, and Harry saw… Voldemort.

Harry shook his head to rid himself of the image. His heart raced, cold sweat dripping down his spine. He wiped his forehead with a trembling hand. He didn't want to, he *couldn't* be an auror. Not while nightmares still plagued him every night. He didn't want to go through anything like the horcrux hunt again.

"Are you alright?" Hermione asked, peering at Harry with concern.

"Yeah," Harry lied, pasting on a smile.

"Eighth-years, come with me," McGonagall announced.

Harry got up. He saw Malfoy stand up from the Slytherin table as well. Harry hadn't seen him eat anything at all.

McGonagall led the eighth-years through a hallway, in the direction of the Ravenclaw tower. She took a turn before reaching the entrance to Ravenclaw, and led them in a new direction. She stopped in front of a painting of an owl.

"Initiis novis," she said loudly.

The owl in the painting blinked and tilted its head with a soft hoot. Harry felt a sharp pang in his chest. The motion was very similar to something Hedwig would do.

"This is the eighth-year common room," McGonagall announced.

Harry entered the room and his mouth fell open. The common room was beautiful. It had a domed ceiling with constellations painted onto it. A giant tapestry with the Hogwarts crest on it covered the far wall

almost entirely. Two staircases led somewhere up, likely toward the dormitories. Curving bookshelves lined the side walls. A fireplace with soft armchairs all around it illuminated the room with a soft glow. The chairs themselves were black, but the pillows on them were all different house colors. A few tables were tucked into a corner, likely meant for studying.

“As eighth-years, you will have some special privileges,” McGonagall said. “Each of you will have a room of your own. You may add and deduct points from houses, similarly to prefects and head students. However, let me make it very clear that this is not a right. If I catch any one of you abusing this power, it will be taken away and you will face consequences.” McGonagall gave the eighth-years a very strict look. “Being adults, you may also visit Hogsmeade whenever you wish, outside of class time, of course. Tomorrow, I will speak with each of you personally in regards to your timetables, and futures outside of Hogwarts. The schedule is posted. The first meeting will take place at nine, so whoever is first should make sure they wake up on time. For right now…”

Professor McGonagall suddenly smiled.

“Welcome home.”

She turned around and walked out of the common room. The portrait swung shut behind her.

Malfoy walked up a staircase and out of sight without saying a single word to anyone. Parkinson followed a few seconds later. Zabini was the only Slytherin remaining in the common room. He looked the others over, before sinking into an armchair with an emerald-green pillow on it.

Harry looked at the remaining people. On the train, they had counted almost all of them. Seamus, Dean, the Patil twins, Terry Boot, and Susan Bones. The people they had missed were Hannah Abbott and Justin Finch-Fletchley from Hufflepuff, and Lisa Turpin and Morag MacDougal from Ravenclaw. Harry barely knew the Ravenclaws at all. In his classes, he had always paired up with other Gryffindors. He was starting to see the merit in McGonagall’s new house system.

Hermione walked toward the bookshelves immediately, closely followed by MacDougal and Turpin. Ron followed Zabini’s example and chose an armchair.

“I’m going to see my room,” Harry said to Ron, before climbing up the

right-side stairs. Both sets of stairs connected to the same hallway. The hallway was lined with doors. Each had a name written on it in curly writing. They were in alphabetical order. Harry walked and read off the occasional name. *Hannah Abbott, Susan Bones, Terry Boot… Hermione Granger… Dean Thomas… Draco Malfoy.* Harry paused outside Malfoy's door. Whatever he was doing in there, it was completely silent. Harry hesitated for another moment, unsure why, before continuing down the hallway. When he reached the door with *Harry Potter* written on it, he turned the doorknob and entered. The room was very cozy. It had a large window with thick, golden curtains facing the quidditch pitch. A desk was tucked into a corner, across from a four-poster bed. The room even had a soft maroon carpet. Harry's feet sank into it almost up to his ankles as he walked over to his trunk. He quickly changed and lay down on the bed. Sleep came the moment he closed his eyes.

Chapter End Notes

> Thank you to my two first readers, even the one that rated this fic a 6.5/10... (Except for Chapter 28, which got a far higher rating, for which I thank him). This chapter was something of a prologue, the action will begin to pick up in the next one. Trust the process, my friends.

Chapter 2: Chapter 1

Harry woke up in a cold sweat, heartbeat pounding in his ears. Scenes from his dream flashed through his mind. Corpses, devoured by a snake. Hissed threats in parseltongue. And red, slitted eyes in a bone-white face.

Harry rolled over and tried to push the nightmare out of his head. Breathe in… Breathe out. But fragments of the dream curled up in the dark recesses of his mind, refusing to leave. Harry kicked the blankets aside and leaped to his feet. He couldn't stay still anymore. The darkness pressed in on him, suffocatingly close.

The sky outside the window was dark. Harry looked out and saw the moon still high up in the sky. Great.

Harry couldn't go back to sleep right now. He grabbed his invisibility cloak out of his trunk and pulled it over his head as he walked out of his room and down the stairs. The stone was cold under his feet after the warm softness of the carpet. The flames in the fireplace of the common room had died down, leaving only ash and coals. Strange shadows danced across the walls as Harry crossed the room and pushed the portrait open. The owl hooted sleepily as Harry walked away, down the hall. He didn't run into a single person on his way out onto the quidditch pitch. He sat down on the grass and looked up at the moon. It was almost full, summoning memories of Remus. Remus, who had died during the battle of Hogwarts. *Tonks. Fred. Moody.* Names and faces flashed through Harry's head. He curled up under his invisibility cloak and covered his face with his hands. Though hidden from anyone looking out of the dark castle windows, grief never had any trouble finding him.

He awoke when the first rays of sunlight brushed his face. He had fallen asleep right on the quidditch pitch. The invisibility cloak was still covering him, thankfully. He trudged back to the castle, shivering slightly. He had to dodge a few people in the corridors, but the common room was still quiet. He managed to slip into his room unnoticed. After a long shower, he wandered back downstairs. This time, there were a few people there. Hermione was chatting with Morag MacDougal and Parvati Patil. Harry sat down with them.

"Good morning, Harry," Hermione greeted.

"Morning."

“Do you know what time your meeting is?”

Harry shrugged. He hadn’t gotten a chance to check yet.

“Harry! This is very important!” Hermione chastised.

“Sorry, ‘Mione,” he muttered. Hermione had that special light in her eyes. “I’ll go check right now,” he added to placate her.

“You don’t need to. Your meeting is at ten o’clock,” Hermione said.

“Do you know mine?” Ron asked, plopping down on the couch next to Hermione.

He slung a casual arm around her shoulders. Hermione pressed her lips together in an attempt to hide a smile.

“You’re hopeless, the both of you,” she sighed. “Yours is at twelve thirty,” she added.

“What would we do without you?” Harry grinned.

“Do you know what classes you want to take?” Hermione asked.

“I’ll definitely need ancient runes, charms, and transfiguration,” MacDougal said.

“Who do you want to be?” Harry asked.

“A curse-breaker,” MacDougal responded.

“My brother’s a curse-breaker!” Ron said, sitting up.

“Bill Weasley, right? Could you introduce us?”

“Yeah, whenever he’s done with his current project. He’s working on an old artifact that puts a nasty aging curse on whoever touches it.”

Ron and MacDougal began a lively conversation about different types of curses.

“What about you, Parvati?” Hermione asked.

“I want a job in the ministry,” Parvati responded.

“Oh, that’s wonderful!” Hermione clapped her hands together. “I was thinking something similar! What department?”

Just like that, the girls were talking as well. Harry closed his eyes and let the chatter wash over him. He was so… *tired*.

The couch under him moved. Harry jumped, grabbing for his wand. His head snapped toward the movement and he saw… Neville.

“Harry?” Hermione asked gently.

Harry lowered his wand and slowly sat down. He took a deep breath, trying to calm his heartbeat. Adrenaline continued to pump through his veins.

“I'm sorry, Neville. You startled me,” Harry said, rubbing his face.

“Sorry, Harry,” Neville responded sheepishly.

“Neville, your conference is at-”

“Eleven thirty,” Neville completed.

Hermione looked happy that at least someone was paying attention.

The rest of the morning passed slowly and calmly. They went down to the Great Hall for breakfast. After Professor McGonagall’s announcement, kids from different houses were sitting together. Harry and the others found seats at the Gryffindor table. Luna wandered over as well. Harry saw that Malfoy was already in the great hall, sitting by himself at the Slytherin table. The Gryffindor table was the most packed. Harry noticed that though the other three houses were mixed rather evenly, almost all the Slytherins remained at their table. There wasn’t a single person from a different house sitting with them.

Owls began flying into the Great Hall, carrying letters and packages. About five owls landed by Harry, clamoring for his attention.

“Fan mail,” Harry muttered, casting spells to check the safety of the letters. All of them were deemed harmless. He opened them and scanned the contents. All were about the same. Each thanked him for what he'd done. Harry incinerated them with a flick of his wand.

He shuddered to think what Malfoy would say about the letters. He glanced in his direction, and saw with surprise that he had quite a few letters as well. He watched Malfoy destroy them all without opening them, and it hit him. They were hate mail, all of them. Malfoy stood and walked out of the room. His food remained on his plate, untouched.

Hermione's conference was first, so she soon left as well. Ten o'clock rolled around so quickly that Harry was almost late for his own meeting. He almost knocked Hannah down— her conference had been right before his— in his rush to get to McGonagall's office.

"The password is Futurum," Hannah called at his back as he passed.

"Thanks!" he called back.

He screeched to a stop in front of the statue guarding Dumbledore's, now McGonagall's, office. A wave of nostalgia washed over him.

"Futurum," he said quietly. The statue moved, revealing a familiar entrance. Harry entered the office. McGonagall had redecorated. The desk was now larger. On the shelves, books replaced the strange instruments. The center of the desk was dominated by a huge plate of biscuits. Behind the desk hung two new portraits. Both were currently empty, presumably belonging to Severus Snape and Albus Dumbledore.

"Hello," Harry said awkwardly.

"Have a seat, Mister Potter," Professor McGonagall said.

Harry sat down, looking at the empty frames. The thought of seeing Dumbledore again, even after everything, made something ache deep in his chest. He longed to speak to him again, but… It wouldn't be the same. It wouldn't be *real.*

"Do you have a career in mind, Potter?" McGonagall asked.

Harry shook his head, refocusing on the matter at hand.

"I wanted to be an auror, but…"

"I completely understand. In fact, I believe you will be a better fit elsewhere."

"Elsewhere?"

Harry had half-expected McGonagall to try to convince him to become an auror.

"Yes, Potter. Elsewhere."

Professor McGonagall smiled.

“But where? I don’t know who else I can be!”

“Don’t sell yourself short, Potter. You may not be an exemplary transfiguration student, but dare I say, you are brilliant at defense against the dark arts. You are a very good quidditch player as well.”

“But defense against the dark arts is mostly for aurors, isn’t it? And quidditch is really only good for professional players.”

“Though you could make a stellar quidditch player, that is not what I have to suggest.”

Harry sighed in relief. He had enough attention on him already without being a professional athlete.

“But then what?”

“Have you considered teaching?”

Harry blinked.

“No, I haven’t,” he responded slowly.

A teacher…

"You led the DA very effectively. Your students were gifted, but it was you that brought out the best in them."

Harry's mind spun. *A teacher…* It was so simple, yet made so much sense. He didn't know why the idea had never crossed his mind.

“Do you wish to pursue this as a career option?”

Harry nodded.

“Yes, professor!”

Professor McGonagall nodded, writing some things down on a piece of parchment.

“Here is your class list.”

“Thank you.”

“One more thing.”

Harry tilted his head, ready to listen.

“You are ahead of the whole school in defense against the dark arts. Much of the curriculum this year will be review for you. Also, you are a special case.”

“Because I’m the chosen one?” Harry asked bitterly.

“Because you plan to be a professor,” McGonagall corrected.

Harry ducked his head, chastised.

“Not many students would get this opportunity, but since you have some experience… If you wish, you may take the practical defense against the dark arts N. E. W. T. today, and instead of taking the class as a student, you may be in it as an apprentice teacher. If you do not change your mind, you may continue helping teach the class next year. After that, Professor Thrushton will leave and you can stay on as the official Hogwarts defense professor.”

Harry’s head spun. He’d spent so much time worrying about what to do after Hogwarts, and Professor McGonagall was offering him an easy, pleasant way out.

“I know this is a serious decision. Take as much time as you need to think.”

“No!” Harry blurted. “I mean, yes! I want to help teach defense.”

“I thought you may say that. Professor Thrushton is waiting for you in the defense classroom.”

Gratitude welled up in Harry’s chest. It felt like Professor McGonagall had just lifted an invisible weight off his shoulders. The only words he could muster were a mumbled *thank you, Professor,* but Professor McGonagall seemed to understand. In any case, she smiled at Harry as he left the room.

Harry was so lost in his jumbled thoughts that he almost bumped into McGonagall's next visitor.

“Sorry,” he said automatically, before realizing that the person in front of him was Malfoy.

Up close, Malfoy didn't look less sick than at dinner. The circles under his eyes were even clearer. The corners of his mouth had a tightness that hadn't been there before, and his pointy face looked even paler than usual.

“It's beyond me why you wear those hideous glasses if you still can't see past your nose,” Malfoy mocked. His heart didn’t seem to be in the words. It seemed like he was taunting Harry more out of habit than out of a true desire to insult him.

“There's a lot of things that are beyond you, Malfoy,” Harry tossed back on instinct.

He expected Malfoy to say something back but he only smirked humorlessly as he passed. Harry looked after him in bewilderment.

“The password's futurum,” he called after Malfoy's retreating back, before turning and striding away. He had a professor to meet with.

Chapter 3: Chapter 2

After Voldemort's defeat, Draco hadn't expected to see Potter again. Outside of the papers, of course. If they allowed papers in Azkaban. Draco had been sure that he'd be locked away to rot forever. His father had been sentenced to a life in Azkaban, and Draco had always followed in his footsteps. Look where that had gotten him. The irony almost managed to bring a smile to his lips.

His mother's sentence was lighter. House arrest at the manor. Draco's trial had been last. The cold, heavy chains of the chair had wrapped around his wrists the second he sat down. He'd listened to a list of his crimes being read out. Letting death eaters into Hogwarts, assisting in the murder of Albus Dumbledore, torturing, and being a death eater. Draco had stared blankly at the floor, trying to shut out the memories. Memories of pain, his own and that of others. This trial was pointless. He was a death eater. The dementors were the only ones who would ever want him among them. His crimes were branded on his arm, currently in plain view.

He hadn't believed his eyes when Potter had shown up. He had thought it a strange, dementor-induced hallucination. Azkaban drove people insane. It had apparently only taken Draco a week. He *had* to have gone mad, because there was no other explanation for why Potter was there, *defending* him. Defending… *him*. Potter, the golden boy with his untameable hair and his bright green eyes and his need to save everyone. He didn't see that some people weren't worth saving. He had spoken with such conviction as he recounted the events of the Astronomy Tower and of the manor, painting Draco as a tragic victim. It was a *lie*, but the jury had bought it and released Draco with only a few months of house arrest.

Draco's mother had been the one to suggest that he return to Hogwarts. Draco embraced the idea. He was going insane, slowly but surely, stuck in the manor with nothing but nightmares and bad memories to keep him company. His mother tried, but she could barely keep herself together. Draco didn't want to leave her, but he had to get out. *Selfish*. He hadn't thought that Potter would return. But then again, Potter was friends with Granger, and Granger would never pass up a chance to learn.

And so Potter returned to Hogwarts, just as chivalrous and *noble* as he had always been. He had clapped for the Slytherin girl during the

sorting. Potter was making a habit out of truly surprising Draco. He had every reason to hate Slytherins, Draco himself had made significant contributions to that list. Yet Potter still clapped for the girl. It was very Gryffindor of him. However, Draco couldn't help noticing that he looked… tired. There was a perpetual downturn to his lips, and his bright green eyes seemed all the bigger on his thin face. Draco wondered why. Potter was a hero now more than he'd ever been. His foe was vanquished, his battle was won. What was going on in his head?

Draco shook his head to dispel the memories. He had a meeting to attend.

“Futurum,” he said to the statue.

Future. A fitting password. Draco entered the headmistress’s office. He was immediately very aware of two portraits on the wall. Severus and Professor Dumbledore looked at him from their canvases.

The astronomy tower. His shaking wand, pointed at Dumbledore's chest. Bellatrix's cold breath on his ear as she hissed her encouragement.

“Good morning, Mister Malfoy,” Professor McGonagall greeted.

“Good morning, Professor.”

Draco sat down in the chair, avoiding looking at the portraits.

A jet of green light shooting out of Severus's wand, hitting Dumbledore in the chest.

Draco shoved the memories away, as far into the back of his mind as he could.

“How is your mother?”

“She is as well as can be expected,” Draco answered politely. “She sends her thanks for accepting me back to Hogwarts.”

“Of course. Hogwarts welcomes all students.”

Draco nodded.

“Would you like a biscuit?” Professor McGonagall asked.

“Pardon?”

“A biscuit.”

Professor McGonagall gestured at the large plate in the middle of the table. Draco took one and took a bite, more out of politeness than anything else.

“Aren't you going to look at your godfather, Draco?” Severus asked from the portrait.

“Hello, Severus.”

Draco finally raised his eyes to the portrait and saw Severus smiling at him. His eyes prickled. He wanted to hug the man, but he was dead. The portrait was just a copy. It wasn’t *real*.

“Draco.”

Draco looked at Dumbledore's portrait. Guilt crashed over him, dragging him back into the murky depths of the past. He could still see Dumbledore falling off the astronomy tower. He, Draco, had held him at wandpoint. Draco wanted nothing more than to disappear, to apparate deep underground and let the cloying dirt suffocate him.

“Good morning, Professor,” he responded, proud of how level his voice was.

Professor Dumbledore smiled. His eyes twinkle as he surveyed Draco from over his half-moon glasses.

“You don't have to avoid looking at me, Draco. If I can exist with Severus as my neighbor, surely you do not think I hold a grudge against you.”

Draco shrugged tersely, shoulders curving inward.

“If you would both stop distracting my student,” McGonagall snapped.

“My apologies, Minerva. Please, carry on,” Dumbledore smiled.

The two of them vanished from their portraits.

Professor McGonagall turned back to Draco.

“Mister Malfoy, last time you had a career consultation, you said that you wished to work in the ministry. Is this still the case?”

“Even if it was, you and I both know that the ministry wouldn't hire

me," Draco responded flatly.

"Is that what I asked you?"

"I beg your pardon?"

Professor McGonagall pressed the tips of her fingers together and gave Draco a serious look.

"I said, is that what I asked you?"

Draco schooled his face into a neutral expression, though annoyance bubbled under the surface.

"No, it is not."

"In that case, I will ask again. Do you want to work at the ministry?"

"I do not."

Professor McGonagall nodded.

"Where do you wish to work, then?"

"In my position, places willing to hire me are very limited."

"Once again, Mister Malfoy, that is not what I asked you."

What did it matter what she had asked him? This whole meeting was a farce. Professor McGonagall could play the benevolent caretaker all she wanted. It wouldn't change anything. No person in their right mind would hire Draco Malfoy.

"No, it is not. However, it is true, and it is relevant to the subject at hand. It is important to consider limiting factors when making a decision as important as this!"

"Mister Malfoy!"

Professor McGonagall voice cracked like a whip. Draco flinched. Professor McGonagall's face softened, but she still towered over him.

"I don't want to hear you basing *your* life decisions on the thoughts of other people ever again. If there is something that you truly want, you must go out and get it. Do not let 'limiting factors' stand in your way, and stop you from trying! I will ask you one more time. What do you *want* to do after Hogwarts?"

“I DON’T KNOW!”

Draco took a deep breath, trying to control himself. To his surprise, he saw that his outburst hadn't angered Professor McGonagall. She was actually *smiling* at him.

“A truthful answer. That is a step in the correct direction, Mister Malfoy.”

They spent the next thirty minutes or so discussing Draco's grades and interests. At the end, the most appealing career was a potioneer. A voice in Draco’s head continued to whisper that nobody would want to buy potions from a death eater, but he didn't bother voicing the thought to McGonagall. She seemed determined to find an occupation for Draco. Walking out of her office, Draco didn't remember the last time anyone had asked him what *he* wanted. McGonagall had shown so much interest in his future, so much determination to *give* him a future. The only other example that came to mind was Potter testifying at his trial. After the meeting with McGonagall, for the first time in a while, Draco entertained the thought that he might have a future at all.

Chapter 4: Chapter 3

Harry passed the defense N. E. W. T. with flying colors. He showed off his array of hexes, cast his patronus, and to complete the lesson, dueled Professor Thrushton herself. She was an amazing duelist. Spells flew back and forth. In the end, they stopped after a deflected jinx exploded one of the desks. After that, Professor Thrushton quizzed him verbally. Harry struggled a bit more in that sphere, but in the end, Professor Thrushton told him that he had passed. Anything he'd missed could be picked up during the year. He was to report to her classroom every day, during the time that the seventh and eighth-years had defense. Harry left after a brief review of the curriculum for the year.

“Harry! Where have you been?” Hermione asked the second he stepped foot in the common room.

Harry ran a hand through his hair. He had completely forgotten that his friends had probably been waiting for him.

“Sorry, ‘Mione. I was with Professor Thrushton.”

“Thrushton? The new Defense professor?” Ron asked.

“Yeah.”

Harry collapsed in an armchair. He was exhausted.

“Why did she need to see you?” Hermione asked.

“I was taking a defense exam.”

“Why'd you need to take a defense exam?” Ron asked indignantly. “You're the best at it out of anyone in this bloody school!”

“It wasn’t a normal exam, It was the practical N. E. W. T.. They let me take it because… I'm going to be apprenticing with Professor Thrushton as a defense teacher.”

Hermione's mouth fell open.

“Oh, Harry, that's brilliant! You're going to be a defense teacher! Of course, you did so well leading Dumbledore’s Army!”

“How long have you wanted to be a teacher?” Ron asked. He was

smiling, but it looked a little forced.

“I haven't, really. Not before today. But Professor McGonagall suggested it, and it felt right.”

“Didn't you want to be an auror?” Ron asked.

“Not for a while, no,” Harry admitted.

Ron frowned.

“Is there a problem?” Harry asked coldly.

“No, I'm happy for you, I really am. Just… Don't you think you could have told me that you didn't want to be an auror anymore? I've been imagining it, you know, fighting dark wizards together. And now you're saying you gave up on your dreams.”

Harry felt the anger, exhaustion, *emotions*, bubbling inside, building up, screaming for a release. He leaped to his feet, hands curling into fists.

“That's great and all, but those are your dreams, not mine. I never wanted to fight any dark wizards at all! But guess what? I had to. And now that I don't anymore, I'm going to do what *I* want. Don't you *dare* tell me that I've given up on my dreams! Those were never my dreams to begin with!”

“Stop it, both of you!”

Hermione stamped her foot.

“Ronald Weasley, if Harry wants to be a professor, you are going to support his choice. And Harry…”

Hermione looked guilty as she continued.

“Ron is right about some things. Ever since… since the war, you haven't talked to us as much. We're your friends. You can tell us these things.”

Harry flopped down onto a couch, scrubbing his hands down his face. The anger drained away, leaving him empty.

“I'm sorry. I'm just… so tired.”

“Are you still having nightmares?” Hermione asked gently.

Harry nodded.

“You should go to Madam Pomfrey. Ask her for a dreamless sleep potion.”

Harry shrugged. He didn't want to talk about it.

“What classes did you two get?” he asked, pulling out the paper McGonagall gave him.

Hermione and Ron followed suit, accepting the change of subject.

“Look, Ron, we have transfiguration together,” Harry said.

“Hermione, we have potions together! Sorry, mate…” Ron winced.

“Potions?” Harry stared down at his schedule. “Do I need potions?”

“I suppose you do, since McGonagall put you down for the class,” Hermione said.

Harry sighed.

“Bloody potions *again*,” Ron groaned.

“Potions is a very interesting class! It teaches…”

Harry tuned out Hermione's rant, looking down at his schedule. His schedule was very full. Maybe it was good that he couldn't play quidditch that year. He just didn't have time for it.

“Oh!” Hermione exclaimed, cutting Ron off mid-sentence. “I almost forgot! Hagrid wants to see us. Sorry, it completely slipped my mind. He said to bring you two.”

“Yes, let’s go!” Ron agreed enthusiastically, tossing his schedule aside. He sounded a bit too relieved.

The trio exited the castle, wandering toward Hagrid’s freshly rebuilt hut.

“He’s still teaching Care for Magical Creatures this year, isn’t he?” Ron asked.

“Professor Grubbly-Plank was at the feast,” Hermione said.

Was she? Harry hadn't noticed.

Ron frowned.

Hermione knocked on Hagrid's door. He opened it, black eyes crinkling in a smile.

“Hermione, Harry, Ron! I wondered when I'd be seein’ ye!”

“Hello, Hagrid!” they chorused.

“Come in,” Hagrid invited, shifting to the side.

Much like the exterior, the inside of the hut looked exactly the same, only newer. The walls weren't as shabby and the floor didn't creak as Harry crossed the room. Even the furniture was the same, albeit a bit sturdier. Everything was also cleaner, missing the clutter that had built up over the years. Weirdly, Harry found himself missing the creaks and clunks. Without them, it just wasn't the same. A reminder of what had happened.

“It looks great!” Hermione exclaimed, looking around.

Hagrid lit up.

“D'ye think so?”

The three of them rushed to assure Hagrid that the hut was absolutely brilliant.

“Hagrid, are you teaching this year?” Ron asked.

Hagrid's face fell slightly.

“I was actually hopin’ you'd come by. I'm leavin’ tomorrow evening. Lots to be done, after everythin’. I've been workin’ all summer, you know.”

“What about next year?” Hermione asked with worry.

“I'll be back, alrigh'! Professor Grubbly-Plank and I, together. Her an’ I have a few ideas,” Hagrid grinned.

Harry nodded. He couldn't help thinking that maybe it would be better this way. Professor Grubbly-Plank wouldn't spend all her time on flobberworms or blast-ended shkrewts.

“I hear yer goin’ to be a teacher yourself, Harry?” Hagrid asked, a twinkle in his eye.

“Yes. Do you think it's a good idea?” Harry asked, strangely nervous.

“It's a bloody brilliant idea!” Hagrid said. “Ye'll come around to visit me, won't ye? These two will be gone by then.”

Hagrid looked crestfallen at the thought.

“Of course I will,” Harry said.

“We will, too!” Ron declared.

“I can’ believe yer graduatin’ this year,” Hagrid sighed. “I remember ye this little.”

He lowered his hand to his knee.

Harry nodded. The reality hadn't really sunk in. This was their last year as Hogwarts students.

“Oh, Hagrid, don't remind me,” Hermione said, misty-eyed. “I can't believe it's all ending!”

“It already ended,” Harry said quietly.

A melancholy silence fell over the hut.

“We haven't gone anywhere yet,” Ron declared. “We're still right here, all of us!”

Harry nodded, a warm spark igniting in his chest. Ron was right. For now, they were all still there.

Chapter 5: Chapter 4

Harry shot upright, gasping for air. This time, he'd dreamt about Hogwarts collapsing, and burying him under the ruins. He grabbed his wand and cast a tempus charm. 4:47. Great.

Harry already knew that he wouldn't be able to go back to sleep. By the time he calmed down, it would be too late already.

Harry walked out of his room and up the hallway. As he passed Malfoy's room, he saw faint light coming from inside. Was Malfoy awake too? Apparently so.

In the common room, Harry wandered over to the bookshelves. His fingers drifted over the titles, until he came to a book called *Defender: A Guide to Wizarding Duels*. Harry picked it up, sat down in front of the fire, and began to read. The book was less of a guide, and more a play by play of famous duels. It offered tips in the margins. Harry found himself getting sucked in, and was very surprised when he cast *tempus* and saw that it was already six. He took the book with him to his room and changed.

He met up with Ron and Hermione in the common room. They began the walk to the great hall for breakfast. Hermione told them about her meeting with McGonagall. They had stayed there for a long time, discussing career options for her. Hermione decided to work in the ministry. Professor McGonagall assured her that she would easily be accepted.

Harry was about to take a step down the staircase, when it suddenly began to move. Ron swore. Harry shrugged, and they started down the long way. On the way, Harry saw a small group of first years in Ravenclaw ties. Why were they all the way over here?

Harry saw their confused faces and realized the answer. He gestured for Ron and Hermione to wait a second, and strode over to the group.

“Are you lost?” he asked.

The little Ravenclaws nodded, staring at Harry with a mixture of fear and awe. Harry did his best to remember their names from the sorting.

“Wendy Mil…”

Millicent? Milbury?

“Milton,” Wendy supplemented.

Harry switched his gaze to a dark-skinned boy with glasses.

“Trevor?”

The boy nodded.

“Trevor Toddson,” he said.

“And… Gary?”

The third boy nodded. Gary and Wendy were both staring at Harry with awe, while Trevor looked only a bit nervous, as you do when an upperclassman begins speaking with you. Muggleborn, likely.

“The Great Hall is that way,” Harry said, pointing in the direction opposite from the one where the Ravenclaws were going.

“Oh,” Wendy said, abashed.

“Wendy,” Trevor groaned.

“You can walk with us, we’re going to the Great Hall too,” Harry offered.

Gary and Wendy looked utterly starstruck.

“Thank you! What’s your name?” Trevor asked.

“*Trevor!* That is *Harry Potter!”* Gary whispered furiously.

“Who?”

Trevor looked genuinely confused. Gary looked like he was about to faint from the sheer ignorance of his friend.

Harry grinned.

“Come on,” he said, catching back up with Ron and Hermione.

“We were definitely not that small,” Ron said to Harry in an undertone as Hermione began talking to the first years.

“Yes, we were.”

Ron shook his head disbelievingly.

“Maybe *you* were, but I was always taller.”

They reached the Great Hall. After a chorus of thank-yous, the Ravenclaws rushed away to tell their friends about what happened.

“How do you not know who *Harry Potter* is?” Harry heard Wendy ask Trevor.

Harry sighed. Trevor was going to get a long lecture on him. He felt bad for the poor bloke.

“It was good of you to help them,” Hermione said, looking at him with something close to pride.

Harry shrugged. He supposed it had been.

Harry picked at his food, not really hungry. The ceiling of the Great Hall showed a clear, blue sky. Good weather for quidditch.

Ginny materialized next to them, as though summoned by the thought.

“Hey, Ron, Harry, Hermione,” she greeted.

Ron yelped as she ruffled his hair.

“Hey, Ginny,” Harry said.

Ginny plopped down in between him and Ron.

“When are quidditch tryouts?” Harry asked.

“Tomorrow afternoon. I hope we get a good seeker. Too bad eighth years can't play,” Ginny said.

“You two should come and watch,” she added, grabbing a sausage. “Hermione, you're welcome too, if you want.”

“Sorry, but I'll pass.”

“Suit yourself,” Ginny shrugged.

Harry forced down a forkful of eggs.

“Oi, Luna!” Ginny called, leaping up from the table and disappearing

in a redheaded whirlwind.

Harry watched her retreat toward the former Ravenclaw table. His gaze slid to the Slytherin table, and he couldn't help noticing that Malfoy was not there. Harry frowned. Where was he?

After breakfast, Harry parted with his friends and went to potions. Some people were already there. Harry's eyes immediately found Malfoy, who was standing in a corner by himself. Potions with Malfoy, what could be better? Other than the two of them, Dean Thomas, and Morag MacDougal, everyone else was a seventh-year.

Slughorn greeted the class and wrote the assigned potion on the board.

“Now, this is a N. E. W. T. class. You will have to take your potions N. E. W. T. on your own, so this year, you will be brewing potions without a partner,” he said.

Harry groaned, along with a large portion of the class.

“None of that!” Professor Slughorn chastised merrily. “I’m sure you’ll all do very well!”

He winked at Harry.

At the end of the class, Harry managed to come up with a potion he deemed passable. He glanced over the rest of the labeled vials. One of the potions looked absolutely perfect. He discreetly checked the label. Draco Malfoy, of course.

Transfiguration with Ron went well. Professor Twiddle was a twitchy fellow, but he knew what he was doing. The class was lax, but students listened. After transfiguration, Harry had his first defense class. To his dismay, neither Ron nor Hermione were in it. Professor Thrushton motioned for him to stand by her desk as people filed in. Some seventh-years, Seamus, Padma Patil, more seventh-years, Susan Bones… and Draco Malfoy.

Harry fought back a groan. Why did he have to have *Malfoy* in his class? He didn't want to make a fool out of himself teaching in front of *Malfoy,* of all people.

Meanwhile, Professor Thrushton started talking. She introduced

herself, and briefly explained the situation with Harry. Harry did not like the starstruck way that some of the seventh-years were looking at him. They didn't look like they were listening to Professor Thrushton at all.

“Our first unit is going to cover dueling. First, we'll review basic spells, and depending on our progress, we'll learn more advanced spells.”

Harry nodded along. He had read the curriculum beforehand.

“I heard that some years back, Professor Lockhart attempted to open a dueling club. I also heard that it… did not go well.”

Snickers sounded from the eighth-years.

“Malfoy and Potter, please demonstrate a duel for us. Hopefully, this time will end better. After you finish, Potter can give Malfoy some tips and pointers.”

Harry nodded. With a wave of her wand, Professor Thrushton cleared a space in the middle of the classroom.

Harry remembered something and smiled involuntarily.

Scared, Malfoy? he mouthed.

He saw a flash of recognition in Malfoy’s eyes. Then, slowly, Malfoy’s thin lips curved into a smile as well.

His lips formed the words *You wish*, as he stepped into the dueling circle.

“Get him, Harry!” Seamus encouraged.

The seventh-years shouted words of encouragement as well. One of them shouted something derogatory at Malfoy, but Harry didn't see who it was. Malfoy's face remained impassive.

“You may begin,” Professor Thrushton announced.

Harry barely managed to throw himself out of the way of a hex sent at him by Malfoy. The second the duel began, all uncertainty vanished from his face, replaced by cold calculation. Harry gained his footing and hurled a hex back. Dueling Malfoy was different from dueling Professor Thrushton. With Malfoy, it was faster. More tense. More thrilling. Malfoy dueled with elegant, strategic combinations. His face

was set in concentration as he fired spell after spell in rapid succession. Harry dodged and blocked, but found himself struggling. Some of Malfoy's spells were wordless, which meant that Harry had to act especially quickly. He was getting tired. If he wanted to win, he had to do something *fast*.

A faint idea flashed through his mind. Harry dodged another spell, and cast a quick *stupefy*. Malfoy blocked the spell easily, but Harry's plan hadn't been to hit him. As Malfoy blocked, he lunged. Malfoy stumbled back, casting a sloppy jinx which Harry batted aside, and physically tackled Malfoy to the floor. Malfoy's wand flew out of his hand, and Harry pressed his own wand to Malfoy's throat.

Malfoy went two shades paler, eyes wide in pure terror. His chest rose and fell rapidly even as the rest of his body went rigid in fear.

Harry quickly removed his wand. Malfoy shoved him away and climbed to his feet, face tinged pink. Rage glittered in his eyes. Harry raised his hands, backing off. He even wondered if he'd imagined the terror in Malfoy's face, but the trembling of his long fingers as he picked up his wand proved otherwise.

"That was *brilliant!*" Professor Thrushwood said, breaking the silence. "Fifteen points to both Gryffindor and Slytherin."

The students began to applaud. Malfoy dusted himself off, all traces of emotion gone from his face. Harry admired his self-control.

"Great job, Harry!"

"You showed that death eater!"

Harry's head snapped toward where the last words came from, but he was again unable to pinpoint which of the seventh-years said it.

"Good work, Malfoy," Harry said loudly.

The class quieted down.

"I don't really have any feedback for you. Your footwork is good, and your strategy is sound. If the duel had gone on for longer, you would have won."

Malfoy's brows rose in surprise at the praise. He accepted it with a nod.

“I think your statement is correct, Potter,” Professor Thrushton nodded. “Except for one thing.”

Harry lifted his head.

“Unfortunately for you, Malfoy *did* win the duel.”

The classroom filled with indignant muttering.

“*How did* Malfoy *win*?”

“*Harry disarmed him*!”

“*Potter won!*”

“Tackling people physically is against the rules of wizarding duels,” Professor Thrushton said loudly, speaking over the class. “Potter broke the rules, and thus forfeits the duel.”

The angry muttering quieted, but didn't go away.

Harry ran a hand through his hair sheepishly. Malfoy didn't look surprised. He had known, Harry realized. Of course he had. He was one of the purest purebloods to ever live, he had probably known the whole wizard duel rulebook by heart before he learned how to walk. After all, he’d challenged Harry to a duel way back in first year. But if he knew, why hadn't he said anything?

“In everything else, Potter, you are correct. Malfoy is a stellar duelist. He is very well practiced. Your methods are a bit more unconventional. As you rightfully noted, Malfoy duels in a more strategic way, while your style is more aggressive and emotional. If I had to give you any advice, Malfoy, I'd say to ease up. Your technique is almost perfect, but it only holds while fighting a conventional duelist. It becomes less effective against unexpected threats, such as Potter's maneuver. Potter, you got lucky. I commend your ability to catch your opponent by surprise, but in an actual fight, I would only use such moves as a very last resort.”

Harry nodded.

“You two would benefit from practicing together. You both have a lot to learn from each other.”

Harry exchanged a glance with Malfoy. The pale wizard looked politely skeptical.

“Everyone, take your seats. Today, we will have a lesson in theory. Tomorrow, we move to the practical portion.”

Harry stayed sitting in the front of the class and contributed however he could. Professor Thrushton gave him ample opportunity to comment. The only thing he didn't like was the continued attention of the seventh-years.

When the class ended, Harry walked out with Seamus.

“Your dueling was amazing! Malfoy looked like he swallowed a lemon when you beat him. Thrushton is crazy if she thinks he won. If this was a real battle, you would have offed him, and sod the rules,” Seamus said.

Harry frowned.

Someone bumped his shoulder on the way by. Harry saw a flash of blond hair out of the corner of his eye as Malfoy strode past.

“Speak of the devil,” Seamus said, without bothering to lower his voice. Malfoy rounded a corner, disappearing from view.

“Seamus,” Harry warned.

“What?”

“Lay off of Malfoy.”

Seamus gave Harry a strange look.

“Why? He's a death eater.”

“*Was* a death eater.”

Seamus frowned. It was clear that he wanted to say something else, but Harry cut him off with a quick goodbye and walked off in a different direction.

The first day was over quickly. Teachers were already assigning homework, which meant Harry spent the evening in the common room with Hermione and Ron, reading a charms textbook. When he finally got to his bed, he fell asleep immediately and though his dreams were uneasy, he didn’t wake up until morning.

Chapter 6: Chapter 5

Draco was enjoying having his own room. Nobody else inside meant that he didn't have to listen to the other boys snoring. He could put his things wherever he wished, and didn't have to deal with other people's messes. He didn't have to speak with anyone, and it was far easier to avoid his peers than it had been in sixth year. It also meant that he didn't have to cast silencing charms before going to bed. There was nobody in the room to wake.

Having his own room also meant that Draco could take as much time as he wanted in the shower, which he was taking full advantage of at the moment. He turned the water as hot as it could go, until it scalded his skin. He knew it wasn't enough. The second he stepped out, the cold would return.

Draco tried not to look at his bare left arm, but failed. The dark mark was still there. The skull seemed to grin at him. *You can never get rid of me, it whispered in his nightmares*. Draco scrubbed at it furiously. He wanted it *gone*. He hated it, loathed it, despised it with every fiber of his being. Draco had tried to remove his dark mark. He'd tried, and tried, and finally given up. Deep down, he felt like it *shouldn't* disappear. It was proof of what he was. A death eater. His past was a part of him that could never be erased, just like the mark. It was a reminder of what he'd done, his burden to bear, his curse.

The heat and steam rose up around him, suffocating him. Hot like fiendfyre. He was burning, burning, burning…

Draco turned off the water with a sharp motion. He doubled over, trying to catch his breath. The cold returned, sinking into his bones with unrelenting slowness. He was utterly pathetic. He hated the cold, yet feared the heat. Cowardly. Weak.

Draco quickly dressed before the mirror unfogged. He didn't want to see his reflection. He knew what he looked like. Circles under his eyes, sickly pale skin, prominent collarbones, and scars. Horrid scars criss-crossing his chest. Another reminder of his past actions.

Draco slicked back his hair, more as a reflex than anything else. A large part of him simply didn't care enough, but his father's lessons were ingrained deep into his mind. He was still a Malfoy, after all. Oh, the bitter irony of it all.

Draco didn't want to go to breakfast. The stares were bad enough without the angry letters. He was lucky that he had been quick enough to contain the single howler he had received so far. He knew that the owls would find him anyway, so he went.

The Great Hall's ceiling was a stormy gray today. The owls swooped down toward him one by one. Draco read the names on the envelopes and destroyed them all. One of them contained a nasty curse that almost set the tablecloth on fire. Draco barely managed to extinguish it in time.

Breakfast ended, and students began filing out of the Great Hall. Draco joined them. A Hufflepuff boy crashed into his shoulder, hard enough to send him stumbling.

"Fifteen points from Slytherin for clumsiness, Malfoy," the boy said with an unpleasant grin.

Draco saw a prefect badge pinned to his robes. His first instinct was to insult the boy, but he bit his tongue. He walked away silently, to laughter from the boy's friends.

"Ten points from Hufflepuff for abusing your power," he muttered once out of earshot.

That gave him a bit of satisfaction.

"And fifteen points to Slytherin, for self control," he added under his breath.

Just because people had it out for him didn't mean his house should suffer.

Draco was one of the first people to reach the defense classroom. The desks had been moved off to the side, presumably to clear space for duels. Draco took his place in a corner of the room. Professor Thrushton nodded in greeting. Draco nodded back, surprised. Most of the other teachers either pretended he wasn't there or avoided his eyes. Well, he mused, Professor Thrushton was new, after all.

Other students filed in. Potter was one of the last ones to arrive. Typical. No sense of punctuality, even as a professor.

Potter, a professor. The notion was strange. Draco had always pictured him as an auror, running around and catching death eaters with Gryffindorish recklessness. Though, it didn't really matter. As long as

Potter stayed away from him, Draco didn't care if he was a teacher, an auror, or a pygmy puff breeder.

Professor Thrushton clapped her hands.

"As I'm sure you remember, today will be our first day of dueling. For today, you can pick your partners. As you may have noticed, there is an odd number of you. Malfoy, as you already participated in a duel last class, for today you will be an observer. As you watch, I would like you to write down comments about the duels. Everyone will get a turn to do this throughout the unit!"

Draco nodded. Perfect. He didn't need the training. Nobody in this classroom, except maybe Potter, could hold their own against him. He could probably defeat them all at once, if he had a strategic enough position. Now *that* would be an interesting challenge.

The rest of the class began to move and pair up. Draco settled down at a desk and took out a piece of parchment and a quill. Professor Thrushton wrote down each pairing.

"Good. Patil and Wendale, you first."

Draco wrote down some notes about each pairing. Most of the students made glaring errors. In previous years, Draco would have written scathing critiques of them all. Now, he tried to be as polite as possible in his assessment of their errors.

While K. Merril's attacks are strong, her shield spells are weak due to the fact that her wrist motion at the end is too abrupt.

"Kate, focus on your shield spells! Move your wrist more smoothly!" Potter barked.

Draco's eyebrows rose. He hadn't expected Potter to notice that. Throughout the duels, to Draco's surprise, Potter often gave advice that matched what Draco wrote down. Every time he *didn't* notice something, Draco felt a smug sense of superiority.

G. Bellhill must stop getting distracted if he hopes to win the duel.

Right on cue, the seventh-year snuck a wide-eyed glance at Potter. So many fans, as always. Bellhill ended up losing. He managed to hit his opponent, but left himself open as he turned to see whether Potter had noticed his maneuver.

“Focus, Gavin!” Potter sighed.

Seamus Finnigan was next, dueling Susan Bones. Despite her mellow looks, Bones was a solid duelist. She fought defensively, and her shield charms looked incredibly strong. Finnigan’s style was more aggressive.

“Seamus, try to even out your elbow,” Potter advised.

Draco clicked his tongue in annoyance. He hadn’t seen that yet. His mental tally of things each of them had noticed shifted to six-one. He’d hoped for a perfect win.

Draco began to write a note about the elbow, when…

Draco threw himself sideways, almost falling out of his chair, as the jinx sent by Finnigan fizzled out against the wall where his head had been less than a second ago.

Draco stared at the char mark on the wall, extremely grateful for his reflexes.

“Seamus!” Potter snapped.

“I missed,” Finnigan shrugged.

“Susan was over there,” Potter pointed.

“I’ll be more careful next time,” Finnigan said.

By the look on his face, Draco filled in the rest of the sentence. Careful not to miss *him*.

The class ended. Draco handed in his parchment and walked out.

“Potter, stay for a moment.”

Harry stopped and turned back toward Professor Thrushton’s desk.

“You did well at assessing the flaws of the students. Your comments were accurate.”

“Thank you, Professor.”

“Now that we have seen the skills of each student, we can put them into pairs that will help them improve. Come, take a seat.”

Harry sat down by Professor Thrushton's desk.

"Tell me, Potter. What did you notice about the pairs?"

Harry thought about it.

"Well, the members of the DA— that's the defense club we ran with Ron and Hermione while Umbridge was here— did better than the others."

"Continue."

Harry tried to recall what else he'd seen.

"Who did the seventh-years pair with?" Professor Thrushton asked, taking pity on him.

"With their friends?"

"Yes, more specifically..?"

"People from the same house?"

Professor Thrushton nodded.

"Correct. I received instructions from Professor McGonagall about promoting inter-house unity. Though the skill levels of the students will take priority, we will attempt to pair them with people from other houses."

Harry nodded.

"Here is a list of students. I will leave it up to you to create a list of pairs. I suggest you refer to Mister Malfoy's notes as you do so. His observations are incredibly astute."

Harry accepted the list and the parchment covered in neat, elegant handwriting. As he read through Malfoy's notes, he had to agree. Malfoy had caught on to a great deal of things. Harry's grudging admiration grew as he read Malfoy's assessments. Despite Harry's expectations, Malfoy hadn't favored Slytherins nor purebloods. Every entry was dry and unbiased.

Harry spent the next half-hour or so making the pairs. After leaving the classroom, he had to run in order to make it to quidditch tryouts on time. He found Ron in the stands and joined him. There were quite a lot of people watching, but given the size of the stands, everyone

was spaced far apart. The spots available were one beater, keeper, and of course, seeker. A beater was quickly found. A large girl whose name Harry hadn't caught swung the bat with enthusiasm and only missed a bludger once. Every bludger she hit spiraled toward her target with considerable force.

“I wouldn't want to play against her. She'd give Goyle a run for his money,” Ron quipped.

Harry nodded in agreement. The girl was a perfect beater.

There were two potential keepers. One was a wiry third-year girl, the other, a larger and more muscular fifth-year boy. Ginny decided to keep both and put one of them in reserve. Throughout their tests, Ron extrapolated on their respective attributes at some length. Harry nodded along.

However, the real issue was the seeker position. None of the candidates had impressed Harry. By Ginny's frown, he saw that she wasn't too happy either. Finally, she picked three people to stay and train.

“Too bad we can't play, eh?” Ron asked.

Harry nodded, but secretly didn't mind. He loved flying and quidditch, but given the difficulty of his classes, he would need the extra study time.

Finally, the Gryffindor tryouts ended. The team left the pitch, and the Slytherin team arrived in their stead.

“Let's watch,” Harry suggested. He was curious to see how the Slytherin team flew.

“Sorry, I promised to meet ‘Mione,” Ron said with a guilty look.

“Alright, go. Tell her I said hi,” Harry said.

He watched Ron leave, then turned back to the game. A girl trying out for chaser snatched the quaffle out of the air. To Harry's surprise, some people in the stands booed. She threw the quaffle and scored. More booing ensued. The next boy who looked like he was only in his second year tried to catch the quaffle and missed. Laughter sounded from the stands. After a few more times, the boy landed and stormed away in tears. Harry was furious to hear some of the spectators laughing again.

Harry got to his feet and walked over to one of the groups jeering at the Slytherins.

“He belongs at home with his mommy!” Harry heard one of the people say.

His hands curled into fists. Harry loudly cleared his throat. The students turned to him.

“If you're not here to cheer on the team, you should leave,” Harry snarled.

“We were just joking around,” one of the kids protested.

“Do you see me laughing? *He* definitely wasn't. Come back when you get a new sense of humor.”

Harry pointed toward the castle, glaring at the students. They skulked away, muttering darkly.

The rest of the tryouts went well. If anyone else had been making comments, they kept their mouths shut after seeing Harry dispatch the group.

Chapter 7: Chapter 6

When Draco entered the defense classroom, a paired list of names was on the board. He found his own name and suppressed a sigh. He was paired with Seamus Finnigan. He was clearly not the only one unhappy. Groans sounded from around the room.

“Ugh, good luck, Kate! Paired with a *Slytherin.* You’d better win,” someone sighed.

The duels began. Draco pressed his lips together as the Kate girl really did end up beating the Slytherin to cheers from her friends. During the next round, a Slytherin girl, Draco thought her name was Matilda, beat a Hufflepuff. Her round of applause was far more subdued, but Matilda accepted it with a small bow and a toss of her head. That girl had some house pride. Good for her.

“Finnigan and Malfoy,” Professor Thrushton called.

Draco rose to his feet and entered the circle. He had watched Finnigan duel last class. He was nowhere near Potter's level. This would be easy.

The duel began. Draco didn't even have to attack him. He could just block his every spell. Finnigan got angrier and angrier. His attacks became sloppier. Draco dodged, and fired a single *tarrantalegra*. It hit, to no surprise. Draco heard unhappy muttering from the people watching. They were all cheering for Finnigan, of course. Draco didn't care. He remembered Finnigan's earlier words very clearly. He didn't bother hiding his sneer. Finnigan deserved everything he got.

Draco raised his wand for a final spell.

The next few moments were a blur. Something hit Draco in the back, sending him sprawling on the hard floor. He heard Seamus shout “*Diffindo,”* before sharp pain split his lower calf.

A wave of panic dragged him under. Pain. *Pain.* The cold, hard floor under his hands. *Marble floors. The manor’s marble floors. Hooded enemies surrounding him.*

No, it's not them, it's not *him.* Only an overconfident Gryffindor, looking scared of what he'd done. *Scared eyes. Scared of* him. *Screaming, screaming, screaming.* Blood.

“Potter, take him to the hospital wing *now!”*

Hands. Hands on his arm, dragging him somewhere.

“Let… Let me go!” Draco gasped.

The hands disappeared. *Strange.*

Draco sagged against a wall, sliding down into a sitting position.

No, no, no, nononononono.

“Malfoy?”

Draco exhaled a shuddering breath, coming back to reality. His fingers were twisted into his hair, hard enough to hurt.

“Malfoy, are you alright? I need to get you to the hospital wing. Oh, bloody hell. Malfoy, you’re… You're bleeding!”

Draco lifted his head and found himself looking into a pair of brilliant green eyes.

Of course it was Potter. He had a nasty habit of being present whenever Draco was having a moment of weakness.

Draco rolled up his pant leg, hissing in pain as it stuck to the cut. A simple flesh wound. Draco drew his wand and muttered a healing spell. Easy and straightforward.

Draco sighed in relief as the pain went away. His muscles slowly relaxed.

“Malfoy?” Potter asked.

“I'm fine, Potter,” Draco snapped.

His father's voice echoed in his head. *Malfoys don't show weakness.* Draco smoothed his hair and stood up, trying to gather his dignity.

His leg buckled. Potter grabbed his arm, looking worried.

“Unhand me, Potter,” Draco drawled. “Your hearing must be as bad as your eyesight. I already said I'm fine.”

Potter stepped back, looking unconvinced, and followed Draco down the hallway toward the hospital wing. Draco did his best not to limp.

Dark memories continued slithering around his mind, taking turns rearing their ugly heads.

Sobbing on the floor, convulsing with aftershocks of the curse. Cruel laughter pressing in on him from all sides, echoing through masks.

Tsk, tsk, little Malfoy. Didn't your father teach you to control your emotions?

Draco shuddered violently. Potter looked at him with concern and fear.

Green eyes staring up from a disfigured face.

Is it him? Is it Potter?

You couldn't be sure… You went to school with him for years, yet you couldn't… be… sure.

Shaking, sick with pure, blinding panic. Unable to speak, unable to breathe, unable to stop the tears.

Draco turned away, raising his chin as he tried to calm his breathing.

“I'm perfectly capable of getting to the hospital wing myself. You can run back to your little fans, I'm sure they miss you already,” Draco said, attempting a sneer.

Potter set his jaw stubbornly.

“Professor Thrushton said to take you to the hospital wing.”

“Well if *Professor Thrushton* said it, you must comply. After all, you're so good at doing what you're told,” Draco said poisonously.

“Listen, Malfoy, I'm taking you to the hospital wing whether you like it or not, so shut your mouth and deal with it!”

“Are you scared that I'll get lost? That's so touching, I might shed a tear!”

Potter glared. Draco knew that he was being petty, but he didn’t care. He was annoyed, in pain, and adrenaline still circled through his veins. Besides, it was satisfying, getting Potter riled up. It felt like old times again.

They reached the hospital wing.

“What happened here?” Madam Pomfrey asked when they entered.

“He got injured during a duel in defense class,” Harry explained.

Madam Pomfrey clicked her tongue, leading Malfoy over to one of the beds. He sat down and stretched his leg out on the bed. Madam Pomfrey cast a few diagnostic spells.

“You healed yourself well,” she admitted grudgingly. “But you still need a blood replenishing potion.”

Malfoy grimaced, but didn't argue.

Madam Pomfrey cast a few final spells. After she finished, she went to get the potion.

“Still here, Potter?” Malfoy sneered.

Harry shrugged. He didn't know why he hadn't left yet.

“Potter, it's just a scratch. You know I've had worse.”

Malfoy rubbed his chest absentmindedly. Harry's eyes widened.

”You were meant to deliver me to the hospital wing. Here I am. You successfully accomplished your mission. Congratulations. You can run along now.”

“Don't tell me what to do, Malfoy.”

“Or what?” Malfoy asked, raising his eyebrows. “You’ll give me detention, *Professor?”*

Harry felt a familiar spark of emotion burning in his chest. Fighting with Malfoy made him feel… alive.

“Or I'll–”

Madam Pomfrey loudly cleared her throat behind him.

“Is there a reason that you're still here, Potter? If not, I will be telling the headmistress that you were bothering my patients.”

“No! I mean, yes! I actually wanted…”

Harry trailed off, scrambling for an excuse. Hermione's words echoed in his head. *You should ask Madam Pomfrey for a dreamless sleep potion.*

“I wanted to ask you for a dreamless sleep potion,” he said, lowering his voice.

Madam Pomphrey's face softened.

“Of course. I'll bring you one in a minute.”

She handed Malfoy his potion and disappeared again.

“Nightmares?” Malfoy asked.

“None of your business,” Harry snapped.

He expected Malfoy to mock him, but the pale boy remained silent. A distant, haunted look came over his face. The silence lasted until Madam Pomfrey returned with the potion.

“Here you are. Two drops before going to sleep.”

Harry thanked her and walked out of the hospital wing, leaving Malfoy sitting alone.

By the time Harry got back, the class had ended. Harry had lunch, so he wasn't late anywhere.

Professor Thrushton looked tired.

“I gave Finnigan detention for a week, and made it clear to the class that when I find out who hexed Malfoy in the back, they will face the threat of expulsion.”

“Couldn't you check their wands with priore incantatem?”

“I did, but the students are smart. Whoever did it covered it with a different spell.”

Harry paced the room.

“This can't be allowed. Someone could have been seriously hurt!”

Professor Thrushton nodded.

“I agree. What are your suggestions?”

Harry thought about it. Professor Thrushton waited patiently.

“Well…” Harry began uncertainly.

Professor Thrushton nodded her encouragement.

“The next class should be theory, with no real duels. After that, all we can really do is keep a closer eye on the spectators while people duel. Maybe split people up, or set up some kind of magical barrier around the duelists.”

Professor Thrushton nodded.

“You don't think we should stop duels entirely?”

“No. It's not fair to punish the entire class for the actions of one person. Also…”

Harry took a deep breath.

“If we don't actually run practical lessons, we'll be no better than Umbridge.”

Harry rubbed the scars on his hand.

Professor Thrushton smiled.

“I think you'll be a great teacher.”

Harry grinned.

Chapter 8: Chapter 7

The small, shining vial glittered in Harry's hand, dreamless sleep potion swirling within. Hermione and Ron had been happy when he told them that he'd finally gotten it from Madam Pomfrey. He was so *tired* of nightmares. He just wanted a good night's rest.

Harry uncapped the vial and tipped two drops onto a small spoon attached to it. He took a deep breath, exhaled sharply, and drank.

Death eaters were attacking Hogwarts. Harry led the defenders, shooting spell after spell. *Stupefy. Expelliarmus. Petrificus Totalus.* Curses flew back and forth. Harry ducked, and a jet of red light shot over his head.

"Kill them!" a boy with a face Harry couldn't make out shouted. "This is war! You need to cast to kill!"

Harry cast protego, blocking a curse.

Next to him, someone fell. A third year, staring at the ceiling with glassy eyes.

"*No!*"

"He's the leader! Kill him!"

The boy pointed at one of the hooded figures. The death eater was running away, black robes billowing behind. Harry pursued him through the fight, dodging flashes of light. Down a corridor, around a corner, another corner… The screams and chaos grew quieter as the battle was left behind.

Harry chased the death eater through a door and found himself in a bathroom. Had that door led to a bathroom before? It didn't matter, anyway. The death eater whirled to face him. A spell rose to Harry's lips, unbidden.

"Sectumsempra!" he shouted as the death eater's hood fell back.

Draco Malfoy stared disbelievingly at his shaking, bloodstained hands. His face crumpled as silent tears flowed from his eyes. The ugly, gaping rips in his robes gleamed red.

Harry's mouth fell open in horror, wand slipping from his numb fingers.

Malfoy let out a single broken sob as he tipped forward, falling to his knees. Harry caught him just before his head hit the ground.

"NO!"

Malfoy's breath came in sharp, wet gasps.

"*You… you did this,"* he rasped, fury burning in his eyes.

"I didn't mean to! Malfoy, I'm sorry!"

The smell of blood, sharp and metallic, filled Harry's nostrils. He wanted to throw up.

Malfoy convulsed in his arms, then went still. His head lolled back, blood trickling from the corner of his mouth.

"Why are you upset? He was a death eater," the boy asked from the door.

"He wasn't! This is wrong!"

Harry jerked back, away from Malfoy's corpse. His blank, gray eyes followed Harry accusingly. Harry stumbled out of the room, hands dripping red. Outside, the battle was still going. He could see the faces of the 'death eaters' now. They were just Slytherins, desperately fighting for their lives.

"Stop!" he yelled.

Nobody heard him. Person after person dropped dead. Seamus. Bulstrode. Dean. Luna. Zabini. Neville.

"They won't hear you," the Gryffindor boy said.

Harry whirled toward him. He saw the boy's face, and his blood turned to ice.

Tom Riddle smiled at him.

"You are a murderer, Harry Potter," he hissed.

"I'm not!"

“The Malfoy boy's blood is on your hands. You and I… We have become the same. Now, *kill!*”

Harry's hand moved of its own volition, like he was under the imperius. Green light shot out of his wand, striking people down left and right. Pansy Parkinson. A fourth-year in a green tie. Theodore Nott. All dead by his hand.

Harry!

He tried to scream, but no sound came out. His eyes widened as his wand pointed directly at little Eleanor Boot. She looked up at him with terror written across her face. For a moment, he saw himself reflected in her eyes. Manic, crazed eyes, hands dripping red with Malfoy's blood, his wand pointed directly at her.

Harry, mate! Wake up!

“*Kill her,*” Riddle whispered in his ear.

He's not waking up!

A jet of green light shot out of Harry's wand, striking Eleanor directly in the chest.

“NO!” Harry screamed, sitting bolt upright in his bed.

Ron and Hermione were looking at him, both pale and terrified.

“Mate, are you alright?” Ron asked.

Harry’s eyes snapped to his shaking hands. They were clean. His shirt was soaked with sweat, and his eyes and throat burned. His breath came in sharp bursts.

“Harry!”

Hermione wrapped her arms around him. He hugged her back, burying his face in her hair. A dam broke somewhere inside him, and the tears began to pour. Scenes from his nightmare flashed before his eyes. It had felt so real…

After a moment, Ron joined the hug.

“Don't ever scare us like that again!” Hermione said shrilly.

“Yeah,” Ron agreed, paling again.

“What happened?” Harry asked in a scratchy voice, wiping his eyes discreetly.

“It was scary,” Ron said in a hushed voice. “You were screaming and we couldn't wake you up.”

“You heard all the way from your room?” Harry asked.

“Actually, no. Malfoy was the one who heard. He tried to wake you up, then went and got us.”

“Malfoy?”

Malfoy, dead on the bathroom floor.

“Yeah.”

Ron grimaced.

“Where is he?” Harry asked.

A few minutes ago…

Draco stood up from his desk and walked out of his room. His homework was complete. There was no point in going to bed yet. He hadn't had a good night's sleep since he had gotten the dark mark.

Draco rubbed his forearm as he walked down the corridor. He was passing Potter’s room when he heard it. Screaming.

You must mean it, little Malfoy. Crave it. Embrace it. Perhaps you need incentive?

No, anything but that, anything!

C-crucio!

Eyes closed to shut out the sight of the writhing, contorting body. But there was no shutting out the screams, agonized and ragged.

“Alohomora!”

The lock didn't open. Curse Hogwarts and its suddenly improved security!

“Patefacio sursum!” Draco tried.

The door flew open. Draco wasn't sure what he had been expecting. What he saw was Potter, tangled in his blankets. A nightmare? But Madam Pomfrey had given him a dreamless sleep potion…

"Potter!" Draco snapped, approaching Potter's bedside.

Potter didn't seem to hear. Abandoning all manners, Draco shook him by the shoulder. Potter still didn't wake up. Even if he did, what would his reaction be?

This wasn't normal. This sleep and refusal to wake up. Malfoy strode out of the room and ran to Granger's door. He hammered on it. No response. He sprinted down the hallway and started knocking on Weasley's door.

Weasley opened it within a minute, Granger looking over his shoulder. Of course she was in his room.

"Malfoy? What–"

"It's Potter. He's having a nightmare."

Draco followed Weasley and Granger down the hall toward Potter's room.

"I'm going to get Madam Pomfrey," he said.

He left without awaiting a response. Madam Pomfrey opened the door almost immediately. Draco briefly explained the issue to her, and she hurried out of the hospital wing right away.

Draco followed Madam Pomfrey back up the corridor, lengthening his strides to keep up with the witch.

Madam Pomfrey entered Potter's room. Draco froze on the doorstep. Potter was awake, sitting on his bed between Weasley and Granger. His green eyes were tinged red, and he looked ill.

"...Potter."

"Malfoy," Potter responded hoarsely.

Was that *relief* in his face? No, surely not.

"Malfoy tells me that you were asleep and had trouble waking up?" Madam Pomfrey asked.

Potter nodded with a frown.

“I had a nightmare,” he explained shortly.

“A nightmare? I gave you a dreamless sleep potion. Did you forget to take it?”

“No! I took it, look!”

Potter pointed to his bedside table, where the potion stood next to a spoon.

Draco frowned. If Potter had truly taken the potion, then how had he had a nightmare?

Madam Pomfrey lifted the vial with the potion and began to examine it. Draco crossed the room to the table and picked up the spoon. A bit of the potion had pooled at the bottom. Except… Dreamless sleep potion was light in color and had a low viscosity. The potion in the spoon was thick. Draco sniffed the spoon. He knew the smell of dreamless sleep potion very well. This was not it.

“This isn't dreamless sleep,” he said.

Madam Pomfrey took the spoon from him and looked at the potion inside.

“Potter, are you sure you took the dreamless sleep potion specifically?” Draco asked.

“How dense do you think I am? Of course I took the dreamless sleep potion,” Potter snapped, eyes flashing.

“Then are you sure that this is the spoon that you used to take the potion?” Draco asked.

“Yes,” Potter bit out.

Draco hummed thoughtfully. Weasley seemed to interpret this in his own way.

“What do you mean, ‘hmm'? Harry already told you which potion he took. I believe him more than you. I don't know what you saw in the spoon, but I'm telling you that it's dreamless sleep potion! *You’re* probably the one who did something to him!”

“*Ronald!* If Malfoy did something, why would he get Madam Pomfrey

and us?"

At least Granger had some sense.

"I'm afraid Malfoy is right," Madam Pomfrey interrupted. "This is not a dreamless sleep potion."

Draco allowed himself a smug smile.

Potter looked lost.

"But I drank the dreamless sleep potion specifically! Madam Pomfrey, I swear–"

"I believe you, Potter. But in that case, we have a far stranger problem. I will give this to Professor Slughorn to see if he can determine what potion it is. That may make things easier. Now, was there anything odd about the nightmare?"

Potter's eyes flicked to Draco.

"It felt real," he said with a shudder. "More real than usual, and more detailed."

"Potter, I would suggest that you refrain from taking the dreamless sleep potion until it is clear what happened and why," Draco interjected.

"Precisely," Madam Pomfrey agreed.

Potter nodded, still looking sad and confused. Draco suppressed a sigh. Potter was utterly incapable of concealing his feelings. His every stray thought was written clearly across his face.

"Thank you," Hermione said to Madam Pomfrey.

Draco took that as his cue to leave. As he left, he heard Madam Pomfrey say, "Potter, I would like you to spend the night at the hospital wing."

He didn't hear Potter's reply.

The next day in class, Potter looked exhausted. He spoke only when spoken to and gave clipped answers. The purple circles under his eyes made him look like a raccoon. Draco sympathized. He knew how it felt.

Luckily for Potter, Professor Slughorn assigned a simple potion. Draco gathered his ingredients and began. The potion was easy, but measurements were very important. Draco grimaced as he watched Potter chop his ingredients.

Finally, he couldn't take it anymore. Draco stood and walked toward the back cupboard.

“For Merlin's sake, Potter, cut your ingredients properly,” Draco hissed as he passed.

Potter looked startled, but to Draco's surprise, he took the advice. Draco made his way back to his cauldron. His potion was bubbling dangerously, and smoke was beginning to rise.

But I haven't added any volatile ingredients yet!

Everything became clear when he saw the faces of the students brewing next to him. Sabotage.

Draco yanked out his wand and just managed to conjure a shield around his cauldron before the potion exploded. Someone laughed nastily.

“Is everything alright over there?” Professor Slughorn asked.

Draco shot the seventh-year Hufflepuff, the one who was laughing, the iciest glare he could.

“Yes, professor,” he responded, vanishing the ruined potion with a flick of his wand.

He started over, slicing the ingredients a bit faster and less carefully than he otherwise would, and made sure not to leave his potion until he was completely done. He finished his second batch just as class ended.

Chapter 9: Chapter 8

Harry's life settled into a simple routine. During the day, he went to class. In the evenings, he spent time with his friends. They went down to Hagrid's a few times a week for tea and rock cakes. Sometimes, he stopped by Professor Thrushton's room, where she taught him about being a teacher. Though he didn't have homework from the defense class, Professor Thrushton made up for it by assigning him papers to grade. It was more complicated than Harry had expected. During the night, Harry did homework. When he slept, he dreamed, and when he dreamed, he had nightmares. He distracted himself with essays and spellwork. Hermione was happy to see that his marks were improving. The only class where he was having problems was…

Harry gaped at his potions assignment, unable to believe his eyes. A T? Why?! Harry had actually been trying in the class! He'd made sure to cut the ingredients properly and stir well after his subpar marks last class. He had thought he'd done quite well making the powerful antidote!

The letter was accompanied by a note. *See me after class.*

Harry waited for everyone to leave and approached Professor Slughorn.

“Harry, my boy. Please, sit,” Professor Slughorn said, gesturing at a desk in the front of the room.

Harry sat down, frowning.

“I'm sure you know why you're here.”

Harry shrugged. He assumed it was because of his marks, but he had no idea why he had gotten the T.

Professor Slughorn shifted, looking uncomfortable.

“I understand that you are the chosen one. You saved the Wizarding world, and that comes with some privileges,” Professor Slughorn began.

Harry blinked. He had no clue where the professor was going with this.

“The first time, I thought it was a good joke. The second as well, and

even the third somewhat humorous. But all jokes become unfunny when they go on for too long."

Harry stared at him blankly.

"Today, this has become dangerous."

"I'm sorry, professor, but I don't know what you're talking about," Harry said.

Professor Slughorn dabbed at his forehead with a handkerchief. He reached into his desk and withdrew six vials.

"Do you recognize these?"

Harry shook his head.

"These are the potions you've brewed in the past classes. This is the one that you handed in today."

Harry lifted the vial. The potion inside was dark and murky.

"But this isn't the right potion," Harry said.

"That is exactly the problem. You were supposed to brew an antidote, and this… This looks like a very powerful poison. To be quite honest, I haven't the foggiest idea how you brewed it!"

"But I didn't! I brewed the antidote, like you said!"

Professor Slughorn frowned.

"Do you claim that you did not brew these potions either?"

"I didn't make those."

"They're the opposite of what you were instructed to brew, each time."

"I don't know what to tell you, professor. I didn't make them!"

Harry leaped to his feet in a fit of frustration. Professor Slughorn waved his hands.

"Calm down, my boy! I believe you. But then, how?"

“How?”

“I don't know, Hermione,” Harry said wearily.

The Great Hall was full of students there for lunch. Harry chewed on a sausage grimly. Professor Slughorn had agreed to change his marks, but the question still weighed on him.

“Maybe someone tampered with your cauldron,” Hermione suggested.

“Who?!”

Harry threw his arms up, almost knocking over a goblet.

“Isn't it obvious?” Ron asked, pointedly looking toward the Slytherin table.

“Malfoy?” Harry asked.

“He’s in your class!”

“I thought about it,” Harry admitted. “But it can’t be him. He brews all the way across the room from me. Besides, he stays by his cauldron for the whole class after someone exploded it.”

“But he–”

“Why would he do that? More importantly, how?” Harry asked.

“Because he’s *Malfoy!* He probably did some kind of dark magic he learned from the death eaters!”

“Honestly, Ronald. Do you ever think? If he was caught doing something to the chosen one, he would be sent right off to Azkaban!” Hermione argued.

Ron conceded defeat.

“Maybe Slughorn confused something,” he shrugged.

“I doubt that,” Harry said. “I saw the potions.”

Hermione looked deep in thought.

At the start of the next potions class, Professor Slughorn told Harry

that he was assigning Malfoy, the top student in the class, as his partner for the day. Malfoy wouldn't physically interfere with the brewing process, but he would supervise and see what, if anything, went wrong. The other people in the class gave the two sideways glances, but thankfully didn't comment. Harry left Malfoy at the table and went to get the ingredients.

Harry returned to the table and began to slice. Malfoy grimaced. Harry continued cutting. Malfoy watched, looking like he was in physical pain.

“What?” Harry snapped finally.

“You are *mutilating* those poor roots.”

“I’m cutting them like the book says!”

“You are cutting them down the *wrong diagonal*.”

“What?”

Harry checked the boom. Malfoy was right.

Harry rotated the roots, cursing under his breath.

“No, not like that!” Malfoy winced.

“Then how?” Harry asked, annoyed.

Malfoy glanced at Slughorn. He wasn't looking. Malfoy pulled the cutting board over and quickly sliced the roots. Harry finished the rest of the ingredients and began brewing.

“Stir slower, Potter,” Malfoy drawled.

Harry glared at him. He slowed down to the point where his hand was barely moving.

“If you want to ruin your potion on purpose, that's your problem. I will have to report this to Professor Slughorn, of course,” Malfoy smirked.

The pointy git looked like he was enjoying himself. His eyes glimmered with barely bridled amusement. Harry shot him another glare, but began stirring at the right speed.

“That's better.”

“Just you wait for defense,” Harry muttered.

“Are you finally going to start abusing your power?”

“Maybe, yeah.”

“Who would have thought? All your time as the chosen one didn't go to your head, but less than a month as a teacher and you're immediately plotting to take advantage of your position. You're stirring too fast again.”

“That's rich, coming from someone who has been abusing his power since he was born. It took becoming a death eater to deflate your huge head,” Harry snapped back.

He regretted the last words as soon as they came out of his mouth, but it was too late. Malfoy’s face froze over, turning into a haughty mask. Harry turned back to his stirring. Malfoy didn't say a word for the rest of the brewing.

Harry finished, scooped the potion into a vial, stoppered and labeled it. Harry set his potion on Slughorn's desk, next to all the potions from his classmates. Malfoy was packing his things. Harry packed up as well. The people in the class filed out, leaving Harry and Malfoy alone with Slughorn.

“Draco, did anything strange happen during the brewing process?” Professor Slughorn asked.

“No, sir,” Malfoy responded.

“Harry brewed the right potion?”

“Yes, Professor.”

“Then what could have caused the potion to change?”

“What?”

Malfoy's head snapped up.

“This is not the correct potion,” Professor Slughorn said.

Malfoy crossed the room in an instant, and snatched the vial from Slughorn's hand. Harry followed on his heels. Over Malfoy's shoulder, he saw that the potion had in fact changed.

“Professor, when the potion was handed in, it was right,” Malfoy said.

His eyes roved over the vial, sparkling feverishly.

“This is impossible!” Harry exclaimed.

“It cannot be impossible because it just happened,” Malfoy said.

“Well said, my boy,” Professor Slughorn agreed.

“Professor, may I take this potion for further study?” Malfoy asked.

“Of course. In fact, you can study this phenomenon further, if you wish,” Professor Slughorn said enthusiastically.

Malfoy nodded. He was still staring at the potion with his eyes slightly narrowed. Something about his face reminded Harry of Hermione when she encountered a particularly tricky challenge.

Professor Slughorn looked relieved to be rid of the problem.

“You may partner with Harry in class and observe the process,” Professor Slughorn said.

“Of course, Professor.”

“I should write you boys a note right now, so that you do not get in trouble for being late to your next class.”

“We have lunch,” Harry and Malfoy said in unison.

They exchanged an annoyed glance.

“Off to lunch you go, then,” Professor Slughorn said, waving his stubby hands toward the door.

“Have a good day, Professor,” Harry said on his way out.

His and Malfoy’s walk to the Great Hall passed in silence. They split up at the door. Harry joined Ron and Hermione at the old Gryffindor table.

“How did potions go?” Ron asked.

“The bloody potion changed again,” Harry muttered.

Before Ron could say something, an explosion sounded.

Harry jumped up, grabbing his wand. Were they under attack?

“MURDERER! DEATH EATER! YOU SHOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN ALLOWED IN HOGWARTS! IF MY SON WAS STILL ALIVE, I'D NEVER LET HIM GO TO SCHOOL WITH PEOPLE LIKE YOU! YOU AND YOUR MOTHER BELONG IN AZKABAN, WITH YOUR TRAITOR OF A FATHER! DEATH EATER FILTH! CRIMINAL!” shrieked an unfamiliar female voice.

Harry slowly lowered his wand as he took in the situation. Malfoy was on his feet, looking paler than ever. A howler hovered in front of him, screaming insults for the whole hall to hear.

Finally, it tore itself to pieces. The Great Hall was silent. Malfoy stood frozen to the spot, still staring at the place where the howler had been.

Someone laughed loudly.

Malfoy spun on his heel and fled the hall.

Before he knew what he was doing, Harry leaped to his feet and raced out after him. He saw Malfoy's cloak disappear around a corner. He chased him through the corridors, until they reached… Moaning Myrtle's bathroom. Malfoy must have gone there reflexively.

Harry stopped in the doorway. Malfoy was bent over the sink, his slight frame convulsing with agonized sobs. He looked so defeated, so *broken*.

“Malfoy?” Harry asked quietly.

“You. Every time,” Malfoy choked out between sobs. “Are… are you here… to finish the job? Snape… Snape won't stop you now!”

Malfoy laughed hysterically, tears still streaming down his face. The scene from Harry's nightmare flashed vividly before his eyes. Malfoy, bleeding out on this very floor.

“No,” he said sharply.

“One spell, Potter! You're– you're no coward. Not like me. You'll be able to do it!”

Malfoy doubled over the sink again, seeming to have exhausted his capacity for words. Tears poured into the sink and down the drain.

Something in Harry's chest twisted at the sight, making his breath hitch painfully. He slowly approached Malfoy and placed a hand on his heaving shoulder.

“*Don't touch me!”*

Harry stumbled back as Malfoy leveled his wand directly at Harry's chest. The wand shook in his hand as Malfoy stared at Harry with wild, bloodshot eyes.

Harry slowly lifted his empty hands.

Malfoy hurled his wand against the wall with an expression of disgust and self-loathing on his face. It fell to the floor with a clatter.

“Get OUT!” he screamed.

Harry fled the bathroom, sobs echoing behind him.

Chapter 10: Chapters 9 and 10

Chapter Notes

> I'm sick of each chapter being called "Chapter 1: Chapter 2" and so on, so here's two in one. This barely counts anyway, since the first one is so short. Now the numbers should all be fine!

Harry woke up from another nightmare. He was so *tired* of this. He kicked off his blankets angrily and stalked out of his room, down to the common room. To his surprise, it wasn't empty. A familiar white-blond head was bowed over the dying fire. The sight brought back memories. The room of requirement going up in fiendfyre, a boy desperately scrambling for safety while another perished in the flames.

Malfoy looked up briefly when Harry entered. He didn't look surprised, only grudgingly resigned. *Of course it's you,* his eyes seemed to say. He was wearing what looked like silk pyjamas.

“What are you doing here?” Harry asked stupidly.

A smirk ghosted over Malfoy's lips.

“Did you think you were the only one to get nightmares, Potter?” he asked.

Harry shrugged. He walked over to the fire and paused by the couch Malfoy was sitting on. Malfoy hesitated, then moved over. He didn't have to, there was enough room, but Harry understood the motion as permission to join him.

Harry sat down. Despite the proximity of the fire, Malfoy was shivering slightly.

“What do you dream about?” Harry asked, on a whim.

Malfoy snorted incredulously.

“You think I'd tell you?” he asked, sounding more curious than mocking.

Harry shrugged.

“What do *you* dream about then, Potter?” Malfoy asked.

Harry didn't answer. Malfoy raised his eyebrows as if to say, *see?*

Harry felt his competitive streak stir. Malfoy thought he was so smart, calling Harry's bluff? He thought he could see right through Harry? Well, Harry would prove him wrong.

Harry began to talk. He hadn't planned to say much, but once the words began flowing, they were difficult to stop. He talked about his nightmare, about Voldemort, about the things that haunted his dreams. He didn't share everything, of course, but as he talked, he felt lighter. Malfoy listened silently, without comments. Shadows thrown by the fire danced across his face. It was refreshing, to talk and be heard, with no pity or concern. Malfoy didn't treat him like a child. He only listened. Harry wasn't entirely sure he was there at all. He looked pale, worn out, more like a ghost than a person.

Harry talked, and talked, until he had nothing left to say. He felt emptied, tired, but also more peaceful. He leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes.

Harry woke up from the first rays of sunlight tickling his eyelids. To his surprise, he found that he was covered with a blanket. The conversation with Malfoy seemed like a dream. Someone had covered him with a blanket. Had it been Malfoy? It must have been.

Chapter 10

Laughter rang through the Great Hall, echoing off the starry ceiling. Bats fluttered above tables groaning with food and candy. The candles were the only thing illuminating the hall, sending shadows dancing across the walls from within carved pumpkins. The atmosphere was joyous, as always during the Halloween feast.

Draco sat in silence on the far side of the table, where the candle-light didn’t quite reach. Everyone was talking, laughing, eating and enjoying themselves. Even the Slytherin table was in a festive mood. One of the prefects, Zalina, was wearing a gaudy vampire costume. Draco heard her loudly telling everyone that she had decided not to dress up this year.

Everyone was celebrating. Everyone, it seemed, except Potter. Potter was smiling and talking with Weasley and Granger, but when they looked away, the smile faded into a distant expression. His heart was clearly not into the festivities. Draco watched him in between bites of a candied apple. A horrible waste of the fruit, in his opinion.

Draco flinched as a hand with acid-green nails snaked around his arm.

“Hello, Draco,” Pansy said.

Blaise stood behind her.

“Pansy, Blaise,” he greeted stiffly.

“You've been avoiding us, darling.”

“Have I?”

He absolutely had been.

“Yes. Which is why you will now accompany us to Hogsmeade.”

“I'd rather not.”

“Don't be such a downer, Draco,” Blaise drawled. “We miss you.”

“You shouldn't,” Draco said shortly.

“As your friends, we're not going to let you spend Halloween staring at Potter in solitude. We are going to go out and get absolutely plastered,” Pansy grinned.

“I am *not* staring at Potter,” Draco snapped.

“Yes, you are. Now come on.”

Draco rose to his feet, knowing there was no point arguing. It was easier to go along with whatever Pansy had in mind. She took his arm, Blaise took the other, and together, they pulled him out of the Great Hall.

The sky was dark, and the first stars were visible. The cold night air made Draco shiver.

They walked down to Hogsmeade in silence.

“Shall we go to the Three Broomsticks?” Pansy suggested.

“No,” Draco said sharply.

He could not go there. Madam Rosmerta's blank, imperiused gaze still featured in some of his nightmares.

“The Hog’s Head it is,” Blaise concluded.

They entered the pub. Ignoring the decent amount of people there, they settled down at a distant table. Draco wished he hadn't agreed to come. It was Halloween, of course the pub was packed. Draco cursed himself for his stupidity. Thankfully, their table was in the shadows in the very back.

Blaise went to get drinks and returned with six shots of firewhiskey. He set two down in front of each of them.

“To Halloween,” he declared.

The three of them clinked glasses and drank. The firewhiskey burned Draco's throat on the way down, and settled in his stomach. It wasn't enough to warm his skin.

Pansy placed her hand on his, before pulling away in surprise.

“Your hand is so cold!”

“Overexposure to the cruciatus will do that to you,” Draco snapped.

Pansy’s eyes widened.

“Ah. To better days, then?” Blaise suggested.

“To better days.”

They drank.

“Why don't you talk to anyone anymore?” Blaise asked, after a beat.

Draco snorted. So *that* was what all this was about.

“I'm serious. The role of a recluse doesn't suit you.”

“I was a fucking death eater,” Draco hissed.

“And?”

“*And?!?”*

“Blaise,” Pansy warned.

“It's in the past. The war is over. You've been found innocent. What's the point of dwelling on it?”

“I *tortured people.* People *died.*”

Draco woke up screaming every night. Dreamless sleep potion had stopped helping months ago. The world had broken less than a year ago, wrenched apart, shattered into millions of razor-sharp fragments embedded into his memories, slicing with every thought, and Blaise wanted him to *get over it*?

“You think you're the only one who did bad things?”

Draco scoffed weakly. He could not believe his ears.

“Do you know why Theo didn't come back to Hogwarts?” Blaise asked suddenly.

Draco shook his head mutely.

“Of course you don't. You were barely ever at Hogwarts last year.”

Blaise took a deep breath, gathering his thoughts. Pansy also looked curious. She hadn't been at Hogwarts at all last year, as far as Draco remembered.

“Hogwarts was hell,” Blaise said bluntly. “The Carrows ran the school. But you see, it wasn't enough for them to torture the ‘impure’ ones. No, they wanted *us* to do it. Theo was among their favorites.”

Blaise took a sip of alcohol.

“He tortured children. Little kids. The Carrows breathed down his neck, taught him dark spells. It ruined him, Draco. He cried on my shoulder almost every night. The only reason why he didn't go to Azkaban is because he gave house elves healing potions to sneak to other houses. He couldn't come back after that.”

Draco listened, horrified. He had thought that it would be better for his friends at Hogwarts. His own memories swam to the surface, blurred by alcohol. Bellatrix, whispering dark spells into his ear as a poor soul twisted on the floor in front of him.

“He was lucky to have you, then,” Draco said.

He drained the rest of the alcohol. He didn't want to remember.

“You should write to him, both of you.”

“Theo?”

“Yes.”

Draco nodded. He should.

“And what about you? Do you have a war story?” Draco asked.

“No. I got lucky. I was mostly left alone.”

“So you had it easy, and you're telling me to just- What, forget about what happened? How *dare* you?” Draco asked indignantly, his words propelled by the alcohol.

“No. Not to forget about it. I don't know what it's like for you, but you're not helping yourself by pushing everyone away. I don't like seeing you like this, Draco.”

“Drop it,” Draco snapped.

Blaise lifted his hands in mock surrender.

The conversation drifted to lighter topics, propelled by Pansy. At first, Draco just gave one-word answers, but then found himself actually enjoying the evening. It had been a while since he'd just talked to someone. The three of them walked up to the castle, unsteady after the alcohol, when the moon hovered directly above them.

Harry couldn’t sleep. He hated Halloween. When he closed his eyes, his mother’s screams echoed in his ears. Finally, he’d had enough. He walked down to the common room and sat down on the couch by the fire, covered in his invisibility cloak. His thoughts didn’t go away, but at least he had something better to stare at than the ceiling above his bed.

Harry jumped when the portrait swung open, forgetting for a moment that he was wearing the cloak. To his surprise, Zabini, Parkinson, and Malfoy stumbled into the room. His suspicions flared. What had the three of them been doing?

Parkinson giggled at something Blaise said, and Harry relaxed. The three of them were clearly drunk.

Parkinson and Zabini stumbled up the stairs. Malfoy did not follow them. He collapsed on the couch, missing Harry by a few centimeters.

Adrenaline shot through Harry's veins at the pale wizard's proximity. After waiting a moment, he cleared his throat.

Malfoy jumped. Harry pulled off the cloak. Malfoy stared at him blankly for a few seconds.

“I must be even drunker than I thought,” he muttered.

His eyes went to the cloak.

“Invisibility cloak?” he asked.

“Yeah.”

“Of course you have an invisibility cloak,” Malfoy sighed.

Malfoy didn't look as drunk as Zabini had. Then again, people got drunk in different ways.

The silence was uncomfortable, itching at Harry’s mind.

“You have to tell me something,” Harry said on an impulse.

“What?”

“I told you something last time. Your turn.”

“You think I'll go spilling my darkest secrets to you just because you told me about your nightmares?” Malfoy sneered, his words blurred around the edges by the alcohol.

“It doesn't have to be a secret. Just, anything. Something about your childhood.”

Harry was not to be deterred.

“Why should I?”

“Why not?”

“You can use the things I tell you against me.”

Harry rolled his eyes.

“You're such a Slytherin. I already said, it doesn't have to be anything secret or dark. Besides, do you really think I'm going to blackmail you?”

“No,” Malfoy admitted after a pause. “You're not Slytherin enough.”

Harry grinned mischievously.

“I have a secret for you, then.”

“What is it?” Malfoy asked.

“Nope. You have to tell me something first.”

Malfoy sighed. Slowly, grudgingly, he started to talk. He spoke about his childhood before Hogwarts. Harry listened to stories of how he got his first broomstick, how he got pecked by a peacock at the manor when he was five, how there were no children around. He was homeschooled before Hogwarts, Harry learned. His mother taught him about magic. He wasn't allowed to actually use it until his Hogwarts years, but there were no rules about brewing potions. Snape had taught him about them for as long as he could remember.

Harry listened to the sound of Malfoy's voice until he fell asleep.

Draco was in the middle of talking about the first time he brewed a potion, when he felt something touch his shoulder. He looked toward Potter, and saw that the git had actually fallen asleep! As if that wasn't bad enough, he had decided to fall asleep on Draco. He was resting his head on Draco's shoulder, and his stupid glasses were digging into Draco's collarbone. Draco pulled the glasses off of his face. He didn’t even stir.

“You *bloody* nuisance,” Draco muttered.

Potter did not react. Draco considered shoving him away, but Potter looked so peaceful. Draco didn't want to disturb him. He sighed.

It was difficult to think properly through the alcohol, and Potter's slow, steady breathing was surprisingly calming. Draco closed his eyes.

Draco drifted from the realm of sleep back to reality. He felt refreshed, and comfortable. For the first time in a long while, he felt warm. Draco hadn't had any nightmares. His cheek was resting on something soft. But… He wasn't in bed.

Draco's eyes snapped open as he remembered where he was. Potter was still sleeping on him, with his head nestled in the crook of Draco’s neck. Draco himself had been resting his cheek on Potter's hair. Both of them were covered with the invisibility cloak. Feeling Potter's body against his while not actually seeing it was very strange.

Draco reached for his wand and cast tempus. It was almost five thirty! Anyone could have come downstairs and found them like that! Draco quickly disentangled himself from Potter, who had thrown his arm over Draco's chest, and fled to his room. The air felt too cold against his skin after the extended contact with Potter.

Memories from last night came flooding back, along with a headache. He had been drunkenly spilling tales of his childhood to bloody Potter, of all people! Draco felt completely and utterly mortified. Yet, something Potter said had intrigued him.

“You promised me a secret, Potter."

Harry looked up from stirring his cauldron. Malfoy watched him, brow arched.

“What? Oh, yeah.”

Harry remembered their conversation.

“I was actually almost sorted into Slytherin,” he said.

The look on Malfoy's face was worth all the gold in Gringotts.

“You? In *Slytherin?* Are you serious?”

Harry nodded, grinning.

“You're the most Gryffindor person I know! You literally claimed the sword of Gryffindor!” Malfoy exclaimed.

Harry shrugged modestly. A dawning horror was reflecting in Malfoy's eyes.

“Merlin, we would have been dormmates!”

“Maybe we would have even been friends,” Harry mused.

He imagined being in the same room as Malfoy every day. That would have forced them to talk, to learn more about each other...

“Do you really think so?”

Harry shrugged.

“Yeah, why not?”

“Well, you *did* refuse my generous offer of friendship on our first day of Hogwarts.”

Harry snorted.

“Generous offer? You insulted Ron.”

Malfoy sneered.

“Anyway,” Harry interrupted before he could say anything. “Yeah, I think we could have been friends.”

A strange look came over Malfoy’s face. His eyes almost seemed to soften. Harry cleared his throat, feeling uncomfortably warm all of a sudden.

“Well, if you managed to be friends with Crabbe and Goyle…”

Malfoy’s eyes turned cold again.

“How ironic that you just rebuked me for insulting *your* friend.”

Harry reddened, mortified. He felt like an utter idiot. Crabbe was *dead!* He'd just said the most insensitive thing imaginable.

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have–” he stammered.

“It’s fine, Potter.”

Malfoy sighed. Harry looked back at his cauldron.

“Vincent and Gregory… They weren’t exactly the sort of people I would have chosen to be friends with. They were incredibly dull. My conversation was wasted on them.”

Of course, not many are worthy of your *conversation*, Harry wanted to mock, but he bit his tongue.

“Our parents were allies. We were expected to interact. They were some of the few people my age that I actually knew before Hogwarts,” Malfoy continued. “In any case, we weren’t close.”

Harry listened while counting stirs. Finally, he reached the exact number and filled his vial with the potion. He raised it to his eyes before stoppering it. It looked right.

Malfoy plucked the vial from his hand and stared at it with narrowed

eyes. It seemed like he expected the potion to attack him if he so much as blinked. With that kind of focus, Malfoy would win any staring contest he participated in.

Harry snorted, imagining Malfoy staring down some poor muggle child.

“What?” Malfoy asked, glancing up.

“Nothing,” Harry responded.

Malfoy gave him a suspicious look and glanced back at the potion.

“Merlin’s bloody beard,” he swore.

The potion had changed color. Malfoy glared at it like it had personally insulted him. If Harry was in the potion’s shoes, he’d have tried to change back as quickly as possible to avoid the pale wizard’s wrath.

“You mark my words, Potter,” Malfoy muttered, turning the vial in his long fingers. “I am going to solve this.”

Chapter 11: Chapter 11

It was a nice day. It was also a Hogsmeade weekend, which meant that most of the school's older population was in the wizarding village, enjoying one of the last warm days of the year.

Draco was not one of those people. *He* was sitting under a tree by the lake with a book. The only reason why he had left the castle was to take advantage of the small amount of people. The chance that someone would disturb him was far less than usual.

Just as he thought that, he heard quiet footsteps. Draco pointedly avoided looking up from his book, hoping that whoever the passerby may be, they would walk past him.

“Hello, Draco,” an airy voice said.

Draco looked up.

“Hello, Luna.”

Luna was not wearing her strange glasses, but her radish-like earrings were in place. She was wearing yellow robes over a stripy jumper and purple muggle pants. It was definitely a *unique* look.

“Why are you out here all alone?” Luna asked.

“I could ask you the same question.”

“I’m not alone. I have my nargles with me. Though, you’re not really by yourself either. Your head is overflowing with wrackspurts.”

Draco decided not to even ask what those things were.

“I’m out here to go visit my friends. Would you like to come with me?” Luna asked.

“Your friends?”

“Yes.”

“Would your friends want me to come with you?”

“They wouldn’t mind. I would like it if you came with me.”

That decided it. Draco stood, tucked his book under his arm, and followed Luna across the Hogwarts grounds. Luna looked a lot more vibrant and alive than she had some months ago, in the dungeon of the Manor. A question spun through his mind.

“Go ahead, ask,” Luna said.

Draco checked his occlumency shields. They were firmly in place. How had she known?

“I’m not reading your mind,” Luna said airily.

A shiver ran down Draco’s spine.

“The wrackspurts told me,” she said.

Maybe it would be good to do some research on these wrackspurt things. Draco took a deep breath, and asked the question.

“Why do you want me to come with you, after everything that happened?”

Why don't you hate me?

“You were nice to me. You brought me food, and talked to me. I know you didn't want to be there either.”

Luna seemed to think that was enough of an explanation.

“But–”

“Let's not talk about this. It makes me sad, and I don't want to be sad. Do you?”

Draco watched the ground under their feet. A thin layer of yellow and brown leaves covered the grass. Luna hummed.

“Aren't the trees pretty in the fall?” she asked.

Draco looked up, and stopped dead.

“Are we going to the forbidden forest?” he asked.

“Yes.”

Draco forced his feet to take one step after another. Luna looked confident. Draco gripped his wand in his pocket. He remembered his

experience there as a first year *very* well.

“Don't worry, it's not dangerous. We're not going far, anyway.”

Draco did not relax his grip on his wand.

“Isn't it funny, the things people are scared of? They fear magical creatures, but usually, magical creatures are the ones who suffer from humans.”

Draco hadn't thought about it like that. He followed Luna down a narrow forest path, listening to her talk. Finally, they reached a clearing.

“Now, we need to wait.”

“For what?”

“For them.”

Luna pointed. Draco looked.

“Thestrals,” he breathed.

Luna nodded, looking pleased. A large thestral entered the clearing, followed by two more. They were hauntingly beautiful. Draco released his wand.

Luna approached one of the thestrals and stroked it.

“May I?” Draco asked, looking between Luna and the thestral.

“If she lets you,” Luna said.

Draco met the eyes of the thestral. It— no, *she*— studied him, then nickered and tossed her head.

“She likes you,” Luna said.

Draco walked up to the thestral, slowly and carefully, before placing his hand on the side of her neck, next to Luna's. He drew his hand over the thestral's warm skin.

Luna stepped away and approached a different thestral, leaving Draco alone with the one he was stroking.

“Do they have names?” he asked.

“That's a good question. I suppose they must, in their own language, otherwise they wouldn't be able to call each other. They don't have names in English. It would be silly to give them second names, just because we can’t say the names they already have.”

“What do you call them, then?”

“I don’t call them anything. I’ve never needed to. You’re the first person I’ve talked to about them, anyway. Most people don’t like thestrals, because they’re said to bring misfortune. They’re very misunderstood creatures, really.”

Draco was oddly flattered. He felt at peace here, he realized. Surrounded by strange creatures who didn’t know or care who he was or what he’d done. Luna was one of them. The forest was alive around her, and she was a part of it.

“Would you mind if I came back here to see them?” Draco asked.

“Why would I? This place doesn't belong to me, you know. You can come back whenever you want,” Luna said with a dreamy smile.

The sun was dipping toward the horizon when Draco finally walked back up to the castle.

Harry and some of the eighth-years were returning from Hogsmeade. At Ron's insistence, they had stopped by Weasley's Wizard Wheezes. Ron had done his best to get them a discount on the grounds of family, but failed. They’d eaten lunch at the Three Broomsticks. After wandering through a few more stores, including Honeydukes, the group began walking back.

“Pepper imp, Harry?” Ron offered.

Harry took the proffered sweet and popped it into his mouth, expecting smoke and fire to come out of his mouth and ears. Instead, his mouth felt very, very cold, like he had stuffed it full of snow and ice. Every breath of air burned his tongue. Once, Harry had seen one of Dudley's idiot friends lick a metal pole in the winter, and his tongue got stuck to it. Harry thought this was how it must have felt. Harry coughed, and a flurry of snowflakes fluttered out of his mouth. His tongue felt heavy.

“What the hell?” Harry tried to ask.

What came out was something sounding more like '*ah th ehh?*'

"Oh my goodness, Harry!" Hermione exclaimed. "Your tongue is frozen!"

Harry felt his tongue. It was hard and cold.

"I'll fix it!"

Hermione waved her wand and cast a warming charm on him.

"Thanks, 'Mione," he said once his mouth thawed, staring at the remaining pepper imps with distrust.

"This must be a bad batch," Hermione said.

"No, it's not. I already ate one, and it worked properly," Neville said.

"I must have gotten unlucky, then," Harry shrugged.

They got back to Hogwarts in time for supper. Harry paused by the former Gryffindor table, looking for a place to sit down. He glanced around the Great Hall, and a few young Slytherins caught his eye. They were whispering furiously. Harry watched one of the girls be practically pushed away from the group. She marched over to the former Hufflepuff table, and began speaking with a Hufflepuff. Harry saw her gesture to the group of Slytherins behind her. The Hufflepuff looked at them, then shook his head. The girl gestured to an empty space by the Hufflepuff. The Hufflepuff shrugged and shook his head again. The girl stalked away, back to her group. The Slytherins walked back to their table and all sat down, with various expressions from annoyed to defeated.

The sight filled Harry with anger. Were the other houses *deliberately excluding* Slytherins from their tables?

A look around the hall revealed that most Slytherins were sitting at their own table. The very few exceptions were mostly among first-years. Nora Boot, for example, was sitting between a Ravenclaw and a Hufflepuff at the former Ravenclaw table. The older Slytherins were grouped at their table, where there was not a single person from another house.

He was not going to allow that to go on.

"Let's go," he said to Ron and Hermione.

“Where?”

“We're sitting over there today.”

Harry pointed.

“Harry, mate,” Ron began, looking as though he was concerned for Harry's sanity. “That's the Slytherin table.”

“There are no more house tables,” Harry reminded.

“Still!”

“I'm going to sit there. You can come with me or not.”

Ron shrugged, still looking confused. Hermione nodded along to Harry's words.

Harry walked over to the Slytherin table and sat down right in the middle. A hush fell over the Great Hall. *Harry Potter* had sat down at the Slytherin table?

The Slytherins themselves were looking at him with varying distrust. One had frozen with his fork halfway to his mouth, gaping at Harry.

Harry looked further up the table, and saw that Malfoy wasn’t anywhere to be found.

The girl next to Harry was looking at him with curiosity, but no hostility. Harry thought she was probably a sixth or seventh year. He’d seen her tall, broad frame in the corridors before. Her dark brown hair was tied back, with a single strand framing her face. She was wearing strange glasses, round like his but with black tinted glass. Large bat earrings dangled from her ears, which made Harry think that she would get along with Luna. Harry noticed a prefect badge pinned to her robes.

“Hello,” he said to her.

“Hello,” she responded.

She was still looking at him. She’d even closed her book. Harry thought that he should continue the conversation, since he had started it.

“What's your name?” he asked.

“Zalina Mogilova.”

Zalina inclined her head in a kind of seated bow.

“I'm Harry, this is Ron and Hermione.”

“I know,” Zalina responded.

“Mogilova? Professor Vector talked about you!” Hermione said, leaning forward to better see Zalina. “She said that you're one of her best students!”

Zalina smiled proudly.

“She says the same about you.”

The two girls began a heated conversation about arithmancy.

“Salad, Harry?” Ron offered. He had taken to offering Harry food in a not-so-subtle attempt to get him to eat. Harry appreciated the gesture.

“Yeah, I'll take some,” he said.

“Ma– Mog– Mogeelova?” Ron asked.

“I can't. Allergies. And please, call me Zalina.”

“What are you allergic to?” Harry asked.

“Garlic,” Zalina responded with a grin. Harry caught a glimpse of sharp fangs. A chill ran down his spine.

Now it was Ron’s turn to lean forward to get a better look at Zalina.

“You're a vampire?”

“Only half.”

Hermione gasped and clapped her hands excitedly. She looked like she wanted to go make some badges for vampire rights.

“Oh, that's fascinating! How do you deal with sunlight? Do you get any special accommodations? Is special food made for you?”

Zalina looked somewhat overwhelmed at the onslaught of questions. Hermione pressed a hand to her mouth.

“I'm so sorry, that was utterly tactless of me,” she apologized.

“I've seen far worse reactions. As long as you're not trying to stake me through the heart, it's fine,” Zalina joked.

Ron, while not trying to drive a stake through Zalina's chest, paled and adjusted his tie so it covered more of his neck. Harry looked at Zalina more carefully. She didn't look like his idea of a vampire. She wasn't that thin, and while light-skinned, she was nowhere near as pale as, say, Malfoy. Harry would never have suspected vampire blood in her.

“Sunlight doesn’t bother me much. I have these for that.”

Zalina tapped her glasses.

“I have horrible eyesight, so I need glasses anyway. You could say that I'm blind as a bat,” she snickered.

She lifted a goblet. It contained something dark red.

“Is that…” Ron began, looking green.

“Don’t worry, it’s not human blood. Animal blood, mixed with sugar,” Zalina said. Ron didn’t look consoled.

Zalina lifted the goblet in a mock toast and took a sip. Ron looked like he was about to faint. Zalina smirked in a very Slytherin way.

“Were you at Hogwarts last year?” Harry asked.

“No, you know how death eaters are about blood purity. We left the country entirely.”

Harry listened to their conversation with half an ear, sending occasional glances at a bag of pepper imps one of the Slytherins was holding. What a strange occurrence…

Chapter 12: Chapter 12

Draco dragged a hand through his hair, fighting the intense urge to slam his forehead into the table. This was impossible. He had tried to find a curse that caused nearby potions to change. When that hadn't worked, he'd scoured potions books, looking for anything even remotely similar to what was going on. He *knew* he'd heard of the phenomenon in question, but he had looked through what felt like every book in the library and found exactly *nothing*. If only Severus was alive… He would definitely know the answer.

Severus…

Draco leaped to his feet, struck by an idea. He doubted that it would work, but it was worth a try. He strode out of the library and toward the headmistress's office, dodging two trip jinxes on the way. His record so far was eight in one hallway, but that had been during a class transition with many people in the corridors.

He stopped next to the statue guarding the door to the office.

"Futurum?" he tried.

The statue didn't move. Draco swore under his breath. McGonagall didn't make stupid sweet passwords like Dumbledore had. The odds of Draco guessing the password were close to zero.

"Mister Malfoy?" Professor McGonagall asked behind him.

Draco flinched, spinning around. Professor McGonagall graciously ignored it.

"Professor," he said with a dignified nod. "I hoped to speak with Professor Snape's portrait."

"Of course," Professor McGonagall smiled.

She turned to the door.

"Turkish delight," she said to the statue.

Draco mentally retracted his statement about Professor McGonagall not using sweets as passwords.

"I assume you'd like some time alone?" she asked.

Draco nodded.

“Go ahead.”

“Thank you, Professor,” he said, stepping through the door.

Severus was waiting in his portrait. Thankfully, Dumbledore was absent.

“Draco,” Severus said. “I was wondering when I’d be seeing you again.”

“Severus.”

A whirlwind of memories swept through his mind. *Severus, giving him his first cauldron for his fifth birthday. Severus, smiling at him after he made his first-ever potion. Severus, signing a note for the Slytherin team to play on the quidditch pitch.*

Severus, death-eater mask in hand. Severus, watching Draco get tortured.

“Do you need something, or is this a social visit?” Severus asked, snapping Draco out of his reverie.

“I’m afraid I have a question for you.”

“What is it?”

Draco took a deep breath, composing himself. He had to focus.

“Have you ever heard of a potion fully reversing its effects?”

Severus frowned.

“Fully reversing? In what way?”

Draco described the phenomenon in detail. Severus listened carefully.

“I’m sorry, Draco, but I cannot help you.”

Draco scowled as his hope drained away. He was back to his fruitless fool’s hunt.

“Perhaps the real Severus would know, but I am just a fragment. What I can say is that what you’re describing is something very rare. Legendary, I daresay.”

Legendary…

Draco's head shot up as he remembered something.

"Thank you, Severus," he said sincerely.

"I see I was able to help you after all?"

"You were."

Draco left the room and strode down the hallway, almost breaking into a run. He sped up the steps to the owlery.

"Hello, Cygnus," he said, stroking the feathers of his beautiful eagle owl.

Cygnus hooted contentedly. Draco dug around in his bag and withdrew a piece of parchment and a quill. He wrote a brief letter to his mother, requesting her to send him a specific book from the Malfoy library as soon as possible. He tied the letter to Cygnus's foot.

"I don't have any treats for you today, but Mother should," he murmured.

Cygnus hooted unhappily, but spread his wings and flew off. Draco watched him soar into the endless sky and fly away, toward Malfoy Manor. Draco regretted not bringing his broom to Hogwarts.

The next day at breakfast, Cygnus returned with a parcel strapped to his feet. Draco carefully untied it, stroking the owl. Along with the requested book, his mother sent a letter and a box of chocolates. Draco tore open the letter first.

Dearest Draco,

I wish you luck with your independent study. You mustn't worry about me, I am perfectly well.

Draco scanned the rest of the letter, guilt eating at him for his sparse letters. He promised himself to write to his mother every other day.

The book was next. Draco unwrapped it right in the Great Hall and began flipping through the pages. His father would be horrified. A book at the table? Absurd. Still, Draco was too impatient to go all the way to the library. The book had no index or table of contents, but at last he found the page he was looking for. The page contained a romantic tale about a woman who had died only to be brought back

by her husband's love. However, after she was resurrected, she was different. She couldn't sense anything, her emotions were muted, and *potions didn't have their intended effect.* The line was annotated in spindly writing.

While this is naught but a tale, Death's Breath, or Corpse Breath, is considered to be a real potions ingredient. When added to a potion, it causes the effects to be reversed. It may turn antidotes into poisons, make love potions cause loathing, or cause sleeping draughts to banish rest for days. The existence of Death's Breath is yet to be confirmed. For other mentions of the dead brought back to life, see "The Woeful Witch", "The Tale of Three Brothers"…

Draco stopped reading. Death's Breath. Of course! It wasn't a curse or spell causing the changes, but an *ingredient.* But for that to be the answer, then… A shiver ran down Draco's spine. Potter would have to be *dead.*

Draco looked over to Potter's table, before remembering that he didn't sit there anymore. For some undoubtedly ridiculous reason, he'd taken to sitting at the *Slytherin* table. There he was, talking to Granger and Weasley.

Dead… It was hard to believe. Potter was too vibrant, too alive. However, it was the only explanation Draco had been able to find. He stood up and, before he could think better of it, approached him.

"Potter."

Potter turned.

"Malfoy?"

"What do you want?" Weasley asked rudely.

"I believe I may have found a solution to your little problem," Draco said, ignoring Weasley.

"What problem?" Granger asked, looking from Draco to Potter.

"The potion problem."

Granger gasped.

"Harry, I'm so sorry, I completely forgot to research it!"

“It’s alright,” Potter said. “Malfoy figured it out, he said.”

“I did,” Draco nodded.

Potter looked at him expectantly. Draco tried to formulate his next question to sound less deranged, but didn’t succeed. He decided to just ask.

“Potter, are you alive right now?”

“What?”

“Are you alive right now?” he repeated, feeling like a fool.

“What do you think, Malfoy? Does he look dead to you?” Weasley spat.

“Have you ever heard of Death's Breath?” Draco asked, continuing to ignore Weasley.

Potter shook his head. So did Granger. Draco allowed himself a moment of smug triumph at the fact.

“When a person is resurrected from the dead, their breath becomes capable of reversing the effects of a potion. This would explain everything that has happened to you, Potter.”

Potter ran a hand through his messy hair.

“I think you’re right,” he said quietly.

“This brings me back to my previous question. Are you… alive?”

“I’m as alive as you, Malfoy,” Potter snapped.

Ah. Touchy subject.

“Yet you have reason to believe that you are afflicted with Death's Breath specifically?” Draco asked carefully.

“...Yes.”

“Alright.”

“What does this mean?” Granger asked. “Can it be healed?”

“As of right now, I do not know. Death's Breath is very rare, more

research and study is required."

"I'll research it as well," Granger nodded.

Good luck, Draco thought wryly. It had taken him a long time to find a book that even mentioned it. However, now that he knew what he was looking for, he hoped that the research process would go faster.

"We need to tell Professor McGonagall about this," Granger said.

Potter slowly nodded. He didn't look happy about it.

"Shall we go now?" Draco asked. He didn't like the looks he was getting, standing by the Gryffindors' table.

"Yeah, let's go," Potter said.

"We'll come with you," Granger said. Weasley nodded, shoving the rest of his sausage into his mouth.

"No, it's fine. Stay here and eat."

"Are you sure?" Weasley asked with an unsubtle glance at Draco.

Potter nodded. Draco rolled his eyes.

"Do you really think I'm going to off Potter in some dark corner? He defeated the Dark Lord, Weasley, I think he'd be able to stand his ground against me."

Weasley scowled, muttering something decidedly unflattering about Draco.

"Let's go, Malfoy," Potter said tiredly.

Together, they left the Great Hall. Draco was still pondering the ramifications of his discovery. Potter had… died? Draco remembered seeing Potter's body in Hagrid's arms far too clearly. It had been the bleakest moment of the battle. Draco had physically felt all hope drain away. It was a miracle when he turned out to be alive. Now, a single question spun around Draco's mind, growing and filling all the space in his head. Had Potter truly died that night?

Draco snuck a glance at Potter. He looked as alive as ever, simply tired.

"Do you know the password?" Potter asked when they reached

McGonagall's office.

"I know what it was yesterday," Draco responded.

He cleared his throat, and in the most dignified way possible said, "Turkish delight."

The statue moved. Potter snorted.

"What's funny, Potter?" Draco asked coldly.

"You. I thought you were going to say something serious and latin, you looked so…" Potter lifted his chin and wrinkled his nose, in an imitation of Draco. "But then you said… turkish delight!"

Potter burst into laughter. Draco felt a blush rise to his cheeks. For a few moments, he engaged in a futile battle to keep a straight face, before the smile finally won. Potter couldn't be dead, he decided. He was too… *alive* for that.

"Are you going to stand outside until evening?" Professor McGonagall's voice carried from inside.

Draco immediately wiped all traces of levity from his face. Potter straightened as well, looking grave again as he remembered the purpose of their visit. Together, they walked into Professor McGonagall's office.

"Hello, Professor," Potter said.

"Good evening, Potter, Malfoy."

If she was surprised to see them together, she hid it well.

"Has Professor Slughorn told you about my… potions problem?" Potter asked.

"He has mentioned that the potions you've been brewing have had the wrong effect," Professor McGonagall nodded.

"We– well, Malfoy, actually," Potter corrected, "...figured out why."

Draco briefly explained the situation. As he spoke, Professor McGonagall's face grew graver and graver.

“This is very serious, Potter,” she said when he finished.

Potter nodded with a frown.

“Potions masters and researchers everywhere will be fascinated by this,” Draco said.

“No,” Potter said sharply.

“What?” Draco asked.

“I said no. We’re not telling anyone about it,” Potter said.

Draco’s mouth fell open.

“But this is a revolutionary discovery!”

“I don’t care. This is my business.”

“Potter has every right to keep this a secret,” Professor McGonagall said.

Draco didn't understand why Potter would want to do that.

“What’s going to happen now?” Potter asked. “Will anything change?”

“Someone will need to study this further. In the future, you may need all kinds of potions, from a simple pepper-up to complex healing potions. You will need somebody to brew their opposites for you.”

“Who?” Potter asked.

“I would suggest Professor Slughorn, but…”

Potter made a face.

“I believe I am right in thinking you would not like his candidature.”

“But then, who?”

“How about Mister Malfoy?”

Draco thought he must surely have misheard. *Him?!*

“Malfoy?” Potter asked.

To Draco's surprise, he didn't look overly opposed to the idea.

“Yes. He already knows, so you would not have to tell anyone else about your condition. He was the one who found the solution, and he is on his way to becoming a potioneer.”

Potter shrugged.

“Mister Malfoy, would you agree to this arrangement?”

“Of course I would!”

Draco fought to keep the excitement off his face. He would get to study Death's Breath, all by himself! This was quite literally an opportunity you got once in a lifetime. He began formulating a list of research questions in his head.

“Wonderful. Potter, I think it would be wise to remove you from your potions class. You do not need the N. E. W. T. in order to become a defense teacher. During this time, you may help Professor Thrushton teach a second defense against the dark arts class instead.”

Potter perked up at this.

“I officially give you both full access to the dungeons. You may use the empty classroom just beyond the Slytherin dormitory for your potions experiments. There is a knight in front of it, the password is gillyweed. I also give you access to the potions store rooms. I trust you will not abuse this power.”

Professor McGonagall gave them both a strict look.

“Malfoy, you will have to not only document the properties of Death's Breath, but also brew potions for Potter.”

Draco nodded.

“Will you tell Professor Slughorn?” Potter asked glumly.

“I will not. However, with your permission, I would tell Madam Pomfrey. She is a healer, and values patient confidentiality.”

“You can tell Madam Pomfrey,” Potter allowed.

Professor McGonagall nodded.

“Is that all?” she asked.

“Yes, Professor. Thank you, Professor,” Potter said.

Draco nodded along before following Potter out of the office.

“I'll need a day to set up the classroom,” Draco said once they were alone.

He would also need to write a list of questions, prepare a list of potions to brew, and more, and more.

“Are you busy at six, the day after tomorrow?”

“No,” Potter replied. He seemed lost in his thoughts.

“See you, Malfoy,” he said.

“Six sharp, Potter.”

Chapter 13: Chapter 13

An owl flew up to Harry during dinner the next day. It was a real beauty, with dark brown feathers and large black eyes. Harry stroked it as he untied the letter. He recognized Professor Thrushton's handwriting.

The additional class that you have been assigned to assist with consists of first-years. We are currently studying ghosts and poltergeists. Stop by my office and I will give you the books to review.

Professor D. Thrushton

First years. An important age. They were still getting used to Hogwarts, and the magical world as a whole. It was quite the responsibility to shape their first impression of it. For the first time, Harry truly considered that aspect of being a professor. He was not going to fail his students.

He stopped by the defense classroom after dinner ended.

“Come in,” Professor Thrushton said.

Harry walked into the room.

“*Accio* book.”

A book zoomed across the room into Professor Thrushton's hands.

“Read chapter two for the information about ghosts. In the seventh-year class, we will also be moving on to dark creatures. Read chapter thirteen before our next class.”

“I will, professor. Thank you.”

“You've been doing very well so far,” Professor Thrushton said.

Harry grinned. Praise from her was rare.

“Thank you, professor!”

“Go on. You have reading to do.”

Once in his room, Harry read the chapters and even took some notes. Hermione would be shocked. This was important, after all.

Chapter thirteen turned out to be about dementors. It was a bit more historical, and decidedly darker. Harry shuddered as he put the book aside. He almost pitied the death eaters in Azkaban.

“Expecto patronum,” he cast, just to feel the warmth that came with the spell. The memory he chose was winning his first quidditch match.

The glowing stag leaped out of his wand. It bounded around the room a few times, before stopping in front of Harry. Harry reached out, and his fingers passed through the light.

“Hello, Prongs,” Harry said quietly.

The patronus dissipated into mist.

Dementors circled him and Sirius. They were in a dark, claustrophobic corridor and somehow, Harry knew this was Azkaban. He also knew that they had to get out. The walls seemed to press in as Harry half-carried Sirius down the corridor, almost tripping over his own feet in his haste. *Faster, faster!* He wanted to cast his patronus, but he didn’t have his wand. Sirius was barely conscious. Every step was more difficult. Finally, Harry collapsed to his knees.

Lily’s screams echoed in Harry’s ears as he waved his arms at the dementors in a futile attempt to get them to leave. The cold set in, seeped into his blood, into his bones. Looking down, Harry saw that the person unconscious on the ground wasn’t Sirius, but Draco Malfoy. A dementor swooped down on the pale boy and began to suck out his soul.

Harry woke up with a shout. He pressed a hand to his chest in an attempt to calm his beating heart. He wasn’t in Azkaban, and neither was Malfoy. Everything was *fine*.

Harry squinted at the clock on his bedside table. 5:14. Curse it all to Merlin.

Harry arrived in the defense classroom right on time for his first-year class. He took his place by Professor Thrushton and watched the students settle into their desks. Ron was right. They really *were* very small.

“Class, this is Harry Potter. Like I told you, he will be assisting me with teaching for the rest of this year. Tell him your names, please.”

The students went around and introduced themselves. Harry recognized Wendy the Ravenclaw who had gotten her friends lost in the beginning of the year. Eleanor Boot was also in the class, however she introduced herself as Nora. Harry made a mental note of that.

He also noticed that in the first year class, kids of all houses mingled more freely.

“Who can tell Professor Potter what we are currently working on?”

Harry shivered at the addition of ‘Professor’ to his name. In the other class, he was either Harry or Potter. However, those students were about his age.

“Ghosts!” the class chimed in unison.

“Correct. I trust that all of you have your homework complete?” Professor Thrushton asked, looking for a moment distinctly like Professor McGonagall.

There was a general shuffling as scrolls of parchment were retrieved.

“Professor Potter will collect them.”

Harry walked among the desks, taking the opportunity to get a closer look at the children.

“We have a guest today. Who can guess who it is?”

A forest of hands shot up.

“Quipton?”

“Is it a ghost?” asked a Gryffindor boy.

“Correct.”

Maybe the guest was Moaning Myrtle. Harry shuddered at the thought.

“Boot?”

“Is it the Bloody Baron?”

“It is not.”

The Slytherins looked disappointed.

“Knobble?”

“The Fat Friar?” a chubby Hufflepuff boy asked.

“No.”

“Is it Merlin?” someone yelled.

Giggles spread through the class. Harry snorted, grabbing a scroll off the joker’s table. The boy gave him a crooked smile. The mischievous glint in his eyes sent Harry reeling, breath catching. For a moment, he’d looked *exactly* the same as Fred.

“Maybe another day,” Professor Thrushton said, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Geld?”

“Is it Nearly Headless Nick?”

“Correct.”

The Ravenclaw girl grinned.

Harry finished collecting papers and deposited them on Professor Thrushton's desk.

Nearly Headless Nick floated into the room through the wall.

“Good morning,” he greeted, tipping his head.

The students giggled, a few called greetings back.

“Good morning, Sir Nicholas,” Harry said.

“Finally! Someone with manners!” Nearly Headless Nick exclaimed. “Harry Potter, wonderful to see you.”

“Great to see you as well.”

“Harry Potter here once attended my death day party,” Nick told the class.

The students gasped in unison.

“Yes, he did,” Nick continued, happy to have their attention.

Harry shifted under the awed gazes of the first-years.

“Sir Nicholas, the students have a few questions for you, if you

wouldn't mind."

"Of course I wouldn't mind! I am always happy to help out the younger generation."

Harry settled back and watched the proceedings. Professor Thrushton monitored the conversation, awarding house points for good questions.

At the end of the class, she assigned homework and let the first-years go.

"Potter, you may go as well. Stop by at five to assist me in grading papers."

Harry nodded and left.

He came back to Professor Thrushton's room at five sharp. She kept him for almost a full hour. Harry had to run to make it to the dungeons in time to meet Malfoy, and it took him a good five minutes to find the right room.

"Gillyweed," he told the knight.

It moved aside, surprisingly silently.

Malfoy was already there and waiting for him.

"You're late," he said.

Malfoy had removed his school robes, remaining in gray pants, a white dress shirt, and a Slytherin tie.

"Cast a bubble-head charm," he ordered.

"Why?"

Malfoy looked at Harry like he was an idiot. Obviously, it was so that Harry didn't contaminate any of the potions. Harry shut his mouth and cast the charm.

"What are we going to be doing today?"

Malfoy gestured to a row of vials on one of the desks. Another desk contained a few neat stacks of papers.

"Today, we're going to focus on the times of the change. Since during

potions, the potion in the vial changed while the potion in the cauldron stayed normal, I assume the ratio of breath to potion impacts the speed of the transformation. This would explain the almost instantaneous change of the dreamless sleep potion in your spoon as well."

Harry nodded. Everything Malfoy was saying so far made sense.

With a wave of his wand, Malfoy placed a bubble of air around the cauldron.

Harry spent the next hour or so just breathing. Malfoy levitated vials of different sizes at different distances from his face. He kept careful time of the changes, and meticulously wrote down all his findings. Finally, he had Harry sit down by a large cauldron and breathe over it.

"After this, are we done?" Harry asked.

He was getting bored and annoyed.

"Yes, Potter. Tomorrow, we can test whether the intensity of your breath impacts the speed of the change."

Harry groaned.

"Stop complaining, Potter. This is being done to benefit you."

"How does the *speed of the change* matter? All that matters is that the potion changes at all!"

"Has it occurred to your thick head that the speed of the change may impact the strength of the potion?" Malfoy sneered.

"No," Harry admitted grudgingly.

"Exactly."

Malfoy walked to the neighboring table and began to drip drops from different vials onto what looked like small, round seeds.

Harry sighed loudly.

"Do shut up, Potter," Malfoy muttered, scribbling onto a piece of paper.

Harry sighed again, louder.

“You may be ruining everything right now,” Malfoy snapped.

“Oh no,” Harry said, stretching the vowels.

“You are such a child,” Malfoy sneered.

“Hey Malfoy?”

“What *now?”*

“The potion changed.”

Malfoy almost tripped over his own feet in a rush to get to the cauldron.

“How long ago? Did you count the seconds? Did you-”

Malfoy looked into the cauldron and saw that the shrinking solution remained unchanged.

Harry burst out laughing at Malfoy's brief expression of bewilderment, followed by dawning anger.

“You are *insufferable,”* Malfoy hissed, flushing red.

Harry was almost crying with laughter. Malfoy looked ready to curse him, but Harry was saved by the potion actually changing. Malfoy rushed to scribble down the time.

“You can go now,” Malfoy said coldly.

“What about you?”

“I still have some tests to run.”

Harry shrugged.

“If you say so.”

He grabbed his things and left the room. He went directly to his room, muttering something about homework to his friends. Instead, he pulled out the marauder’s map.

“I solemnly swear that I’m up to no good,” he said.

Lines and corridors appeared on the map. He searched it until he found the little potions room. The dot labeled Draco Malfoy drifted

around it, pausing in places. Harry began writing his transfiguration essay, but occasionally glanced at the map. Malfoy stayed in the dungeons for a long time.

The next day, the dementor unit began. Harry sat by Professor Thrushton's desk and listened to her lecture. He took notes, not just on the material, but also her technique. How she taught was more important to him than what she was teaching.

“Professor Thrushton?” Malfoy asked.

Harry looked up in surprise. He hadn't heard Malfoy speak in the class a single time, unless he was asked a question.

“Yes?”

“May I step out?”

“If you must.”

Malfoy stood and left, taking his bag with him. Harry watched the door shut behind him with a frown.

For the rest of the class, Harry found that he couldn’t concentrate. His eyes were drawn to the door. Finally, the class ended, but Malfoy didn’t come back.

Defense was last that day. Harry was a professor, after all. If a student left a class and didn’t return, it was his responsibility to find out why. Or, at least, that was what Harry told himself as he pulled the marauder’s map out of his trunk.

“I solemnly swear I’m up to no good,” Harry said, tapping it.

He searched it for a few minutes before finding Malfoy outside. He left the castle and walked down to the water. Malfoy was sitting under a tree, looking out at the lake. It looked inky-black, smooth waves rolling across the surface.

“What do you want, Potter?” Malfoy asked without looking up. The wind stirred his white-blond hair.

“You skipped a class,” Harry said.

“No, I didn't. I came on time, asked if I could leave, and was given permission to do so. What, exactly, did I do wrong?”

Harry opened his mouth, then closed it again. He shrugged, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

“Is that all?”

“Why did you leave?”

“Fuck off, Potter.”

Harry sat down on the grass next to Malfoy.

“Are you deaf or stupid?” Malfoy snapped.

“I asked first.”

“That's so mature of you,” Malfoy sneered.

Harry stretched out his legs.

“You're not leaving until you get an answer, are you?”

“No.”

“That's ironic. You, of all people, should know,” Malfoy spat.

There was such rage burning in his eyes that Harry almost regretted starting the conversation. He hadn't expected such an extreme reaction.

“I was *in* Azkaban, you moron. My father is still there. So I'm *sorry* if I don’t like hearing about my worst– The most *horrible*–”

Malfoy’s voice broke. He glared at Harry with red-rimmed eyes, daring him to comment.

“I’m sorry,” Harry said quietly.

Malfoy let out a humorless laugh.

“What are *you* sorry for? You’re the one that got me out of there.”

Harry was sorry that it had happened at all. Life was just one thing after another. First, Sirius had been stuck in Azkaban. He had gotten out, but he died in the war, killed by a death eater. The war ended, the death eaters were sent to Azkaban, but so was Malfoy. Harry had stopped him from getting placed there permanently, but his father was still inside.

“It never really ends, does it?” Harry murmured.

“No.”

Waves lapped at the shore, tinged orange by the start of the sunset. Malfoy's shoulders sagged. The anger faded, revealing exhaustion etched into his sharp features. He looked haunted.

“Go away, Potter,” Malfoy said. The words dropped heavily from his lips.

Harry stood and walked away. When he looked back, he saw Malfoy looking out over the water, silhouetted against the fiery sky.

Instead of going to his room, Harry headed to the owlery. The rustle of wings and the soft hoots in the semi-darkness were soothing, albeit melancholy. Harry pulled out a scrap of parchment and a quill and scribbled a note, using the wall as a writing surface.

Professor Thrushton,

Can Malfoy be excused from the theoretical classes about dementors?

Harry paused. He probably needed a reason, but he didn’t want to go too deep into the details.

He has an unpleasant history with them.

Thanks,

Harry

Harry tied the note to the foot of a barn owl. He stroked it.

“Sorry, I don’t have anything for you,” he said.

The owl clicked its beak reproachingly, but spread its wings and soared off. Harry walked down the stairs from the owlery, feeling like he’d done a good job.

Chapter 14: Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See end of chapter for trigger warning without spoilers

Next defense class, he got his response in the form of Professor Thrushton handing Malfoy a paper excusing him. As he scanned it, his eyes narrowed. He read it again, then his head snapped toward Harry. Harry nodded slightly, smiling. Malfoy's lips pressed into a line, eyes burning. He whirled on his heel and stalked out.

When Harry left the class, Malfoy was waiting. He nodded in the direction of a corridor, inviting Harry to follow him. Harry walked after him, curious. Malfoy paused and looked both ways before seizing Harry by the sleeve and yanking him into an empty classroom. He whirled on Harry, nostrils flaring.

"*What* did you tell her?" Malfoy snarled.

Oh. So *that* was the matter.

"Nothing!"

"Then *what* in the name of Merlin is this?" Malfoy hissed, brandishing the note.

"I didn't say anything, I just asked for you to be excused!"

"Fuck knows why I told you anything in the first place, but it *wasn't so you could do something like* this!"

"I thought it would be for the best!"

"Saint Potter, always doing what he thinks is best for people," Malfoy mocked viciously. He looked ready to start spitting poison. "I don't need your help, and I most certainly don't need your pity!"

Harry felt a wave of guilt crash over him. He knew what it was like to have people tiptoeing around him. He would have been absolutely furious if something like that had happened to him.

"I'm sorry," Harry said sincerely. "You're right, I shouldn't have done that without asking. I didn't think."

“That’s not a surprise. You don't know *how* to think!”

Harry took the insult silently.

“If your mind had to conjure up a single thought, your head would explode from being used in such an unusual way!” Malfoy raged on.

Harry felt his patience beginning to erode.

“I apologized already. What more do you want? You don't have to be such a prick about it!”

“Oh, *I'm* being a prick? You are an utter fool, Potter!”

“Well, you're a git!”

“Scarheaded idiot!”

“Ferrety ponce!”

“It's a wonder you managed to stay alive this long!”

“In case you forgot, I didn't!” Harry yelled.

Malfoy closed his mouth. He took a step back and crossed his arms as his face slid back into a cold mask. The only evidence of their fight was the spots of color high on his cheekbones.

After a moment of silence, he turned and left.

Their second meeting in the brewing room passed in relative silence. Draco preferred it that way. After their fight, everything he’d said to Potter had been coldly polite. Potter, for his part, acted like the whole thing hadn't happened at all, aside from the occasional guilty look. Draco finally told Potter that he could go. He left, and Draco remained. He checked on the spiders he'd tested with the reversed shrinking solution. They had grown the exact amount Draco had predicted. He allowed himself a moment of triumph before carefully writing down all his findings. Finally, it was time to leave.

Draco exited the dungeons and began heading upstairs. He reached the second floor when his next staircase suddenly changed direction right in front of him. He sighed, and began walking the long way.

“*Offendo*!”

The trip jinx hit him in the back. Draco fell, banging his elbow on the stone floor painfully. *Fuck!*

Draco scrambled for his wand, but he was too slow.

"*Incarcerous!"*

Ropes twisted painfully around his wrists, ankles, and mouth. This was *not good.*

Five people in hoods approached him warily. The one at the front, the leader, apparently, kicked Draco's wand away.

Draco tried to shift into a seated position. Someone grabbed a fistful of his robes, pulled him up, and slammed their fist into his nose.

Draco's head snapped to the side as stars exploded across his vision. Pain lanced through his face. The person in the hood threw him back down onto the floor.

Pain. Cold stone floors underneath him. Hooded figures, gathered around him.

No, no, no, no, no!

Draco yanked against his bonds, desperate to escape. He struggled to breathe, his nose was broken and his mouth was mostly blocked by the incarcerous spell. He wheezed breath after breath.

"Maybe we shouldn't…"

"Shut up! He's a death eater! He got Seamus in trouble, and he rigged the duel to beat Potter!"

"No. I'm leaving."

One of the hooded figures turned and hurried away. The leader swore at their back.

"Whatever."

He turned back to Draco.

"The rest of us have no problems dealing with a fucking death eater."

A foot connected with Draco's side. Fire burned through his ribs as something snapped.

“Go on, try your spell!”

“This should be good. *Memorias malum!*”

This was a dark curse! Why were they–

He was writhing on the marble floor, screaming, screaming, screaming under the wand of a hooded, masked figure.

What the HELL did you do to him?!

Every nerve in his body was on fire, burning with indescribable pain. His flesh was bubbling, charring and blackening, peeling back from his bones. But no, it wasn’t, because then his nerves would fry and the pain would stop, He had no such mercy. No matter how he twisted, it didn’t lessen for a single moment. He screamed until his voice was raw and broken.

This wasn't supposed to happen!

It stopped. Draco convulsed with the aftershocks of the cruciatus, sobbing with relief. He couldn’t make out the face of the death eater under the mask. It couldn’t actually be his father, it *couldn’t, it COULDN’T…*

“Well done, Lucius… Again. Prove your loyalty. Prove that you value the cause over your family.”

No, not again, anything but that, *ANYTHING*–

“Crucio.”

The world became agony again. His body felt like it was being torn to pieces, skinned alive and then doused in salt. Fresh screams ripped from his throat. He wanted it to end, *everything* to end, to *stop feeling!*

FATHER, FATHER, HELP ME! PLEASE, HELP! END IT, MAKE IT STOP!

SEVERUS, PLEASE! HELP ME, SOMEBODY, PLEASE, PLEASE!

Shut him up!

Finite incantatem! FINITE!

Darkness devoured him. Glorious, wonderful darkness.

Malfoy had been gone for a long time. Harry opened the marauder's map. He wasn't in the dungeons, or in the common room. Finally, Harry saw his dot on the second floor. It wasn't moving.

Harry had a bad feeling about this. He jumped to his feet and ran out of the common room, taking the map with him.

He reached the right hallway, and gasped.

"Malfoy!"

He raced over to him. Malfoy lay on the ground in a crumpled, bloody heap. His wand lay discarded a few steps away.

"Fuck!"

Harry rushed over. He had to do something. He wasn't good at healing spells, he had to get Malfoy to the hospital wing.

He lifted Malfoy into his arms. He barely weighed anything at all. A pained groan escaped Malfoy's lips. Harry sprinted down the corridors toward the hospital wing, trying to jostle Malfoy as little as possible.

"MADAM POMFREY!" he yelled.

Madam Pomfrey rushed out. Upon seeing Malfoy, she gasped in shock. She levitated him to a hospital bed and went to work.

Harry watched, unable to keep still. Madam Pomfrey magically removed Malfoy's shirt and began healing his broken ribs. Malfoy cried out in his sleep as his bones snapped into place.

Harry saw old, jagged scars crossing Malfoy's chest. Had *he* done that? Harry felt suddenly ill.

Madam Pomfrey moved on to Malfoy's face. She fixed his nose and jaw, then got to work on the various bruises.

Harry watched, imagining what he was going to do to the people who had done this. He was going to murder them and bury their bodies under the whomping willow, where nobody would ever find them. He was going to tear them to pieces with his bare hands.

Finally, Madam Pomfrey stepped back and wiped the sweat off her forehead.

"All fixed. He was affected by some sort of dark curse, he'll need to

stay here until I can assess him mentally," she muttered, more to herself.

A dark curse?!

Madam Pomfrey turned to Harry with a dangerous look in her eye. She walked over to him, and though slightly shorter, she seemed to fill the whole room.

"I hope you weren't the one that caused all these injuries?" she asked in a terrifying voice.

Harry felt the urge to hide under one of the hospital beds.

"Of course not!"

The look in Madam Pomfrey's eye softened slightly.

"What happened, then?"

"Malfoy and I are working on a project," Harry began.

"The potions one?"

"Yes."

Harry briefly explained what had happened, omitting the part about the Marauder's Map.

"Do you have any idea who is responsible?"

"No. But I am going to find out," Harry said darkly.

Madam Pomfrey nodded approvingly.

With a quick goodbye, Harry left the hospital wing.

Once he made it to his bed, Harry struggled to fall asleep. After tossing and turning for hours, he finally managed it. His dreams were haunted by bloodstains and dark marks.

Harry woke up rather early. He quickly dressed and took off toward the Hospital Wing.

He was intercepted at the door.

"Mister Potter, what are you doing here at this hour?" Madam

Pomfrey asked, hands on her hips.

“I wanted to see Malfoy.”

“First of all, it is far too early for that. Second of all, Mister Malfoy is resting and will not be taking visitors today.”

“But–”

“No.”

Harry deflated.

“How is he?” he asked.

“He will be alright.”

Harry slunk away, not placated in the least.

“You have displeased me greatly, young Malfoy… What do you have to say for yourself?"

Draco tried to speak, but he couldn't move. He could only stare into those horrible red eyes.

“Nothing? How unfortunate. It is lucky then, that I have a way to loosen tongues.”

The Dark Lord's lipless mouth stretched into a smile as he aimed his wand directly at Draco.

“Crucio!”

Draco shot awake with a scream. He pressed his hands over his face, trying to just *breathe.* It had been a dream. The last thing he remembered…

The last thing he remembered was writhing on the manor floors under his own father's wand.

The air froze in Draco's lungs. Was he insane? Had it all been a dream? Hogwarts, Potter, the end of the war?

Draco was almost scared to open his eyes, yet he did anyway. He was sitting in an unfamiliar bed. No, he realized. A hospital wing bed.

“Morning, Malfoy. Good to see you're up,” said Madam Pomfrey.

Draco almost burst into tears of relief. He restrained himself, nodding stiffly. Madam Pomfrey took a seat beside his bed.

“You were attacked by a group of students last night.”

It all came flooding back. The corridor, the attackers, the curse. Merlin, he was so *stupid!* What had happened to his vigilance if a gang of *Hogwarts students* could catch him unaware?

“Your physical injuries are healed, but I am more concerned about injuries of the mental sort. I detected dark traces of magic around you.”

“Memorias Malum,” Draco said numbly.

Madam Pomfrey gasped.

Memorias Malum, the memory curse. It forcibly returned the victim into their worst ever memory. For an ordinary person, this would mean reliving a moment of humiliation, or grief, or the pain of, say, breaking an arm. Even an ordinary person would come out of it in a damaged emotional state. That was likely what they'd been counting on. Draco, though, was no ordinary person.

“That explains the oddity of the cruciatus symptoms you are exhibiting,” Madam Pomfrey said.

Cruciatus.

“If you do not mind, I'd like to rest now,” he said in a choked voice.

Madam Pomfrey nodded, concern in her eyes. As she walked away, Draco yanked the curtains around his bed shut and collapsed into the pillows, shaking with sobs.

The next morning, Harry sped out of breakfast and up a corridor. He had a clear destination in mind. The hospital wing.

“Mister Potter,” Madam Ponfrey greeted.

“Can I see Malfoy?” Harry asked.

Madam Pomfrey pursed her lips.

“Fine. But if Mister Malfoy is resting right now, do *not* disturb him. His recovery has been difficult.”

Difficult?!

She waved Harry toward one of the doors leading to private rooms. He fought the urge to sprint inside, instead trying to be as quiet as possible. The curtains around the bed were drawn.

“Malfoy?” he whispered.

There was no response. After a moment of hesitation, Harry pulled the curtain aside.

Malfoy was asleep, curled into a shivering ball. Sweat stood out on his furrowed brow, his eyes darted around under closed lids, and his teeth were tightly clenched. He was obviously having a nightmare.

Harry deliberated for a whole two seconds, during which he concluded that if *he* was having a nightmare, he would prefer to be woken up. Then, he reached out and shook Malfoy's shoulder. His skin was ice-cold.

Malfoy shot into a seated position, his eyes flying open. He saw Harry, took in his surroundings, and sank back down, hugging himself.

Harry gave him a moment.

“What are *you* doing here?” Malfoy asked through chattering teeth.

“Yesterday, you were taking a long time to get back to the common room. I went looking for you.”

“Why?”

The question, asked in a small voice, made Harry frown.

“What do you mean, why?”

“Why did you come looking?” Malfoy asked, turning away from Harry.

“I was worried, wasn’t I? It was late!”

Malfoy didn’t respond. His lack of insults and snappy responses was beginning to scare Harry in earnest.

“Who attacked you?” he asked.

“It doesn't matter.”

“*Doesn't*- What the bloody hell d’you mean, it doesn't matter?” Harry demanded.

“Why do you care, Potter?”

“They beat you to a pulp! I thought you were going to *die!”*

“Maybe that would’ve…”

Malfoy’s raspy whisper trailed off.

“Would’ve what, Malfoy?” Harry asked, icy dread curling up in the pit of his stomach. He couldn’t shake the feeling that Malfoy had been about to say that it would’ve been for the best.

Malfoy didn’t respond, turning his back to Harry.

“Malfoy?”

No response.

“Malfoy, say something.”

Malfoy spun back around to face Harry, face twisted into a scowl.

“You want me to say something? Fine! *Go away.* Has it occurred to you that I may want to rest? Your bloody questions are not what a sick person wants to hear first thing after waking up!”

Malfoy’s voice rose to a shrill shriek, eyes sparkling with tears.

“I’m sorry, I–” Harry stammered.

“LEAVE!”

Harry fled the room.

At dinner, Harry was still lost in thought. He looked around the hall, wondering which of the students had attacked Malfoy. He hated the thought that things like that could happen at Hogwarts. Hogwarts was supposed to be safe. Students weren't supposed to be stuck in the hospital wing, alone, because they had been attacked by other

students.

Malfoy was missing dinner. Harry decided to bring him something. He grabbed an apple and a couple sausages and stood.

“See you later,” he said to Ron, walking away before he had a chance to respond. Harry didn't want to deal with questions about where he was going.

When he entered the hospital wing, Malfoy was sitting in bed and staring into nothingness with glassy eyes.

“I brought you something to eat,” Harry said.

“I'm not hungry, Potter,” Malfoy said, shifting his dead-eyed stare to Harry.

“You need to eat.”

Harry held out the food. Malfoy looked at it like Harry was offering him a poisonous snake.

“Come on, please?”

Malfoy mechanically took the food and bit into the apple.

Harry’s concern only grew. The normal Malfoy would have said something like “*Do my ears deceive me? Saint Potter said please?*”. Or probably something more cutting and creative, but he would *not* have let it slide.

“I’m sorry about earlier. I shouldn’t have pushed you,” Harry muttered.

“An apology from Harry Potter? I’m honored.”

That was more like it. The flat, emotionless tone in which Malfoy said it was still concerning, along with the blandness of the quip itself, but it was a step in the right direction.

“I’m eating. You can leave now,” Malfoy said.

Harry shook his head.

“You're going to vanish it the second I step out the door,” he said.

Malfoy sighed, and took another bite. Harry sat down on the foot of

his bed.

“I wouldn't vanish it the second you stepped out the door. I would wait until you were down the hallway,” Malfoy muttered.

Harry let out a surprised chuckle.

Malfoy finished the food and vanished the apple core.

Harry stood up to leave.

“Potter.”

Harry turned.

“I suppose I should say thank you,” Malfoy forced out.

An awed smile appeared on Harry's face. Draco Malfoy had just said thank you to him.

“Don't look so smug about it,” Malfoy snapped.

Harry only grinned wider.

“Potter?” Madam Pomfrey asked.

Harry jumped.

“Good afternoon, Madam Pomfrey!” he greeted, turning to the witch.

“Good afternoon.”

She walked around Harry and over to Malfoy.

“You are healed. I suggest you stay here for the night, but you can leave if you think that would suit your needs.”

“I'll leave now.”

“Come back tomorrow for a check up.”

“I will.”

Malfoy stood up. He looked himself up and down and grimaced. He was wearing yesterday's robes, which had wrinkled, and his hair was mussed from sleep. It made him look more like a normal person and less, well, Malfoy-ish.

Harry waited for him by the door. Malfoy walked past him and started in the direction of the common room. Harry followed.

“What now, Potter?”

“What do you mean?” Harry asked, feigning ignorance.

“You are following me.”

“I don't know what you're talking about. I forgot my transfiguration essay in my room, that's all.”

Malfoy sighed. They weaved between students and up the stairs.

Something hit the floor a hair away from Malfoy's foot. Harry recognized the glow of a trip jinx. His head snapped toward where it had come from. A Hufflepuff boy was glaring at Malfoy.

The rage that Harry had felt after finding Malfoy yesterday returned tenfold. Hogwarts should be *safe.* Nobody was going to attack other students on his watch.

“Ten points from Hufflepuff,” Harry snarled.

“What?” the boy exclaimed.

“You should start walking before I make it fifteen.”

“But he's a death eater!”

Harry's fingers twitched around his wand. He wanted to hex the boy, but just barely restrained himself.

“*Twenty more points from Hufflepuff*.”

The boy stormed away in a huff. Malfoy grabbed Harry by the arm and dragged him toward the common room. Once they were inside, Malfoy spun to face him.

“You shouldn't have done that,” he snapped.

“Why not?”

“It's only going to make people madder.”

“So you just let it happen? You let people get away with attacking you?”

“What's going to change? They won't stop. I'm leaving Hogwarts soon anyway!”

“Was he one of the people who attacked you?” Harry demanded.

“I already said I’m not telling you,” Malfoy spat.

Harry wanted to shake the stubborn Slytherin so hard his teeth rattled.

“One of them used a dark curse on you! That crosses a line! What if they use it on others?”

Malfoy’s face twisted in rage, patience finally coming to an end. He reared like a snake preparing to strike.

“First of all, *Potter,* you yourself have used a dark curse on me before. I have the scars to show for it. Or have you forgotten?”

Harry reeled, feeling like he’d been struck.

“Second of all, you and I both know why he used it on *me*. I’m not exactly an innocent student, am I? Besides, I scared him too badly for him to repeat the experiment. He thought he’d killed me,” Malfoy smirked humorlessly.

And that was a *good* thing?!

“You need to stand up for yourself,” Harry argued feebly. He was losing and he knew it. Still, he *felt* that he was right!

“Stand up for myself and get sent to Azkaban for scaring students?”

“You could tell a teacher!”

“Why? How many times do I need to say it to get it through your thick skull? *It won't change anything.* There will always be people like that.”

“You don't know what will happen until you try! What do you have to lose?”

Harry bit his tongue, thinking Malfoy was going to hex him. Instead, the pale boy seemed to deflate.

“You can't fight the whole world, Potter.”

Harry was left standing silently in the center of the common room,

watching Malfoy's retreating back.

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TW: Torture

Chapter 15: Chapter 15

The common room was empty, as was to be expected. It was well past midnight, after all. Harry sat on the couch and stared into the flames of the fireplace. That night, he had dreamed about corpses. He'd been walking through Hogwarts, finding the bodies of his friends. Ron, Hermione, Luna, Ginny, Neville, and strangely, Malfoy. Harry tried to get his mind off the nightmare, but couldn't. Whatever he tried to think about, it came back to his friends, which led back to-

Bloody *fucking* hell, not again. *Think about something else, something else, SOMETHING ELSE.*

Harry was so focused on his thoughts that he didn't notice that someone had been coming down the stairs until the person was almost all the way to the couch. Harry jumped a whole foot into the air when he saw movement out of the corner of his eye.

"Bloody *hell,* Malfoy! You scared me!"

Harry frowned when he got a good look at Malfoy's face. His eyes were darting around the room, and his breathing was erratic. He was shivering so hard that Harry could hear his teeth chattering.

"Are you alright?" Harry asked, needlessly. Malfoy looked terrified.

Malfoy made no sign of having heard Harry. He stood as though rooted to the spot, unable to move. Harry stood, took Malfoy's wrist, and yanked his hand away. The pale boy's skin was ice cold.

This was not good. Harry led Malfoy over to the couch and pushed him into a seated position. He grabbed his wand and cast a warming charm on the pale wizard. The shivering didn't go away. Harry swore.

"You should have stayed in the bloody hospital wing," he muttered.

Should he take Malfoy there now? Though, whatever was happening to him wasn't something Madam Pomfrey could fix, she had said that he was healed physically.

After a moment of deliberation, he sat down next to Malfoy and wrapped his arm around his shoulders. With his other hand, he grabbed a quilt and threw it over the violently shaking wizard.

Slowly, Malfoy's shivering began to lessen. That was good.

“Fuck,” Malfoy breathed, pressing his fingertips to his forehead.

Harry sighed with relief. Malfoy was speaking.

The pale wizard shifted away. Harry quickly removed his arm from around Malfoy’s shoulders, hoping he wouldn’t see his blush in the darkness.

“The Dark Lord,” Malfoy said quietly.

“What?”

“You asked what I dream about. The dark lord. He was angry.”

Harry knew what Voldemort’s anger looked like.

Malfoy hugged himself, fingers wrapping around his narrow shoulders. He stared blankly into the fire, not seeming to register what was happening around him. His mind was somewhere far, far away.

“Sometimes, he's mad at someone else, and makes me punish them instead. Sometimes, it’s fire. He doesn't show up in those dreams. *You* do.”

“What do I do in those dreams?”

Malfoy remained silent.

“You don't have to tell me,” Harry said quickly.

“I see you, on your broom above the flames. But you don't fly down.”

You don't save me was left unsaid, but Harry understood the implication.

Harry didn’t like the haunted look in Malfoy’s eyes. He cast his mind around for something, *anything,* to distract him from whatever was happening in his head.

“What’s your favorite color?” he asked stupidly.

It worked. Malfoy looked away from the fire, focusing on Harry with a perplexed look on his face.

“What?”

“Your favorite color,” Harry repeated, feeling like an idiot.

"...green."

Such a Slytherin. A half-hysterical laugh escaped Harry at the ridiculousness of the situation.

"What?" Malfoy asked defensively.

"Nothing, it's not you," Harry gasped, unable to stop. The laughter forced its way out until tears were streaming down his face.

Malfoy watched him, first with mild offense, then with a small smile of his own.

"What's *your* favorite color, then?" he challenged.

"I don't have one," Harry admitted.

Malfoy sputtered in indignation. Everything about his body language conveyed outrage that Harry *didn't even have a favorite color*, yet he dared ask Malfoy his. The motion almost sent Harry into another bout of laughter, but he managed to restrain himself.

"Why do you care, anyway?" Malfoy asked, eyes narrowing in suspicion.

Finally, he was back to his normal self.

"Well, obviously, it's so that I can blackmail you with this top secret information," Harry said, fighting to keep a straight face. "Nothing says as much about a wizard as his favorite color."

Malfoy glared at Harry.

"You know, I don't know much about you," Harry said, dropping the ruse. "You could adore Celestina Warbeck's songs and I'd have no idea. I mean, I know that you're a poncy git, you play quidditch, you're smart, you like potions, but other than that type of thing? Nothing."

The look Malfoy gave Harry spoke a million words, most completely inappropriate, but after a moment he nodded.

"That was the oddest, most backhanded compliment I've ever received, Potter," he sneered. "Still, it must be more than you've ever gotten."

Harry chuckled.

“And by the way, I *hate* Celestina Warbeck,” Malfoy grimaced.

A silence came over them. Neither wanted to return to the solitude of their respective rooms, where nightmares lurked in waiting. Harry shut his eyes, listening to Malfoy’s quiet breathing, and didn’t even notice himself fall asleep.

When he woke up, Malfoy wasn’t there.

In the morning, someone knocked on Draco's door.

Draco frowned. Not once in the entire year so far had anyone disturbed him. Who could it be? Potter?

Just in case, Draco gripped his wand in his pocket as he opened the door, and came face to face with Seamus Finnigan.

Draco's grip on the wand tightened, but Finnigan didn't look hostile. He shifted from one foot to the other, both hands empty.

“Malfoy.”

“Finnigan?”

Finnigan exhaled sharply.

“Look, Malfoy, I don't like you.”

Draco scoffed. He'd noticed.

“Still, I just want you to know, I didn't have anything to do with the people that attacked you.”

Draco blinked. This was not what he'd expected.

“One of them is, *was*, my friend, he told me all about it. He seemed *proud* of it! Ganging up on you like that…”

Finnigan shook his head in disgust.

“We're supposed to be better.”

Better than people like you.

Draco did not know what to say.

“Anyway, what I'm trying to say is I reported them to McGonagall,”

Finnigan finished, meeting his eyes.

Stupid Gryffindors with their accursed sense of justice!

“Are you expecting me to thank you?” Draco asked, arching a brow.

“No,” Finnigan snorted. “The day Draco Malfoy says thank you to me is the day I go to Saint Mungo's mental ward.”

Draco's lips twitched.

“I just wanted you to know,” Finnigan concluded.

“I see.”

“Yeah. That's it, then. Bye,” Finnigan said awkwardly, before hurrying off.

During dinner the next day, Professor McGonagall approached Malfoy. Harry watched her say a few words to him, after which they both left the hall. A few minutes later, Malfoy came back. He looked ruffled, and a dark scowl stretched across his face. Professor McGonagall, meanwhile, collected a few students from different tables and left with them. Harry noticed that she looked livid. He guessed that she had managed to get the information about the identity of Malfoy’s attackers out of him, which was why he looked so murderous.

His suspicions were confirmed the next day at breakfast.

“Attention, students!” Professor McGonagall said.

The hall fell silent as all heads turned to the headmistress.

“It has come to my attention that there have been *incidents* of hateful behavior going on within these very walls.”

Her glare swept across the room.

“These incidents have ranged from petty pranks to violence and endangering the lives of students. As I’ve said, I will not tolerate this sort of behavior in my school. Every student inside this castle has the right to be here, and the right to safety while being here. From now on, every action, no matter how small, taken in contradiction to that will result in a week of detention for the perpetrator, along with the taking of fifty points. Repeated or extremely severe offenses will lead to expulsion. The identity of the person being targeted will *not* be a

valid excuse to avoid punishment. Do I make myself clear?"

Professor McGonagall's nostrils flared. A chorus of meek *yes*es and nods followed her tirade.

"Thank you. Enjoy your meals."

Chapter 16: Chapter 16

The dementor unit brought one good thing. Finally, it was time for the class Harry had been looking forward to the most. Patronuses.

“Today's class will be taught fully by Professor Potter,” Professor Thrushton said, before sitting down and opening a book.

That was that, then. Harry shuddered at the form of address. It was one thing with the small first-years, but with his friends and peers, it was even weirder.

“Good morning,” he said.

A solid start.

“As you know, today we start casting patronuses. It is done like this. *Expecto patronum!”*

Harry focused on his first Christmas at Hogwarts. The stag appeared. The class gasped. The stag made a few circles around the room before Harry let it dissipate.

“Let's get started.”

Harry walked around the classroom, giving advice and correcting stances. He awarded points generously. The excitement of the students when they finally got it right made Harry grin every time. This was his favorite part of teaching.

Harry turned to the next student, and saw that it was Malfoy. He cleared his throat to hide the surprise, and plowed on as though this was normal.

“Hello, Malfoy. Can you show me how you cast your patronus?”

Malfoy swished his wand through the air. His form was perfect.

“*Expecto patronum*,” he said.

Nothing happened.

“Your wand movement is excellent, so it must be the memory part that you should work on. Try a different one.”

Malfoy closed his eyes for a moment. He opened them again and nodded.

“*Expecto patronum*.”

Again, nothing. Someone giggled meanly.

“Five points from Gryffindor. Focus on your own spell,” Harry snapped.

Malfoy glared at him. Harry shrugged.

“Continue.”

Malfoy didn't manage the patronus that class, or the class after that. If anything, it was getting worse and worse. Harry sensed his annoyance growing with every failed attempt.

The next class, Professor Thrushton distributed a mild fear-inducing potion to mimic the effects of a real dementor. The amount of students who could perform the spell decreased exponentially. Harry cast an invisible bubble-head charm on himself to keep the air clear. That reminded him that he had another meeting with Malfoy scheduled for the evening. He’d almost forgotten.

Harry set out for the brewing room ten minutes before six, making sure to be on time. Maybe he’d even arrive before Malfoy. Wouldn’t that be something?

Harry’s hopes to be first were dashed the second the door swung open. He could hear the cauldron bubbling from the room. Malfoy was already busy. Harry wondered how long he’d been there already. The air was thick with steam. A few strands of Malfoy's hair stuck to his forehead as he left the cauldron. His sleeves were rolled up, exposing the dark mark which stood out starkly against the alabaster skin of his forearm.

Malfoy saw where Harry was looking and yanked his sleeve down.

“Bubble-head charm, Potter,” he snapped.

Harry cast the charm quickly. He had forgotten.

“Here, breathe on this.”

Malfoy shoved a vial into Harry’s hands. He lifted it into the bubble and exhaled.

“What's this for?”

“That is one of the potions you breathed on last time. I'm testing whether the change only happens once, or if the potion will continue to switch back and forth. The latter is unlikely to happen, but if it does, that will require further study.”

Harry gave Malfoy back the vial.

“That's smart.”

Malfoy looked mildly surprised at the compliment.

After breathing on what felt like the millionth potion, Harry had had enough.

“That's it. We're done for today,” he announced.

“Fine, Potter. Get out.”

“Oh, no. You're coming with me.”

Malfoy looked up.

“Me? No I'm not, I still have tests to run.”

“Not today, you don't. You can't stay cooped up in the dungeon forever. The vapors will melt your brain.”

“If you truly believe that, you should worry about yourself. You don't have much of a brain to spare,” Malfoy sneered, turning away.

“You are coming with me. We are going to get some fresh air and play quidditch,” Harry declared.

“I don't have my broom.”

“It won't kill you to use a school broom.”

“This from the proud owner of a firebolt?”

“I'll use a school broom, too. Come on, Malfoy! I haven't flown in ages, and you're the only decent seeker in this bloody school!”

“My, my, that was almost a compliment.”

“Come on, please?”

Malfoy looked conflicted. He glanced toward the potions.

Harry played the ace up his sleeve.

“That is, if you're not scared of losing.”

A flame of competitiveness ignited in Malfoy's eyes.

“Oh, you wish, Potter.”

Twilight covered the quidditch pitch in a soft, purple light. The first stars twinkled overhead as Harry and Malfoy walked out. Harry grabbed a snitch and two brooms from the shed, passing one to Malfoy. Malfoy climbed on and leaped into the air. Harry followed him, feeling the wind in his hair. He flew up, up, up, letting out a whoop. On a count of three, he released the snitch. The game was on.

In the end, Harry and Malfoy collapsed on the grass side by side, exhausted. The game had been fun. The school brooms weren't his firebolt, of course, but that had only added to the challenge. Throughout the game, Malfoy had sworn at his broom more times than Harry could count, which had been hilarious.

“I still won, Potter,” Malfoy said.

“No, you didn't,” Harry said, lifting his fist in which the snitch was clasped.

“I had it *in my hand,* and it wouldn't have gotten away if *someone* hadn't shoved me!”

“You should have held it tighter,” Harry grinned.

Malfoy muttered something about stupid Gryffindors. Harry laughed.

Malfoy sighed. Harry found himself staring. Malfoy's normally perfect hair had been messed up by the wind, and his efforts to smooth it back down hadn't fully worked. The frosty wind had brought color to the pale boy's cheeks, and the game had brought a sparkle to his eye.

“I told you that it would be good for you to get out of the dungeon,” Harry said.

Malfoy rolled his eyes.

“That was… not unpleasant,” he admitted.

Harry took that as a win.

“I hate the school brooms,” Malfoy muttered.

Harry laughed.

“I have my firebolt, you can fly on it if you really want to.”

“Really?”

Malfoy sat bolt upright, eyes shining with excitement.

“Accio firebolt,” Harry said with a lazy wave of his wand.

“Triwizard tournament,” Malfoy remembered.

“You remember?”

“Of course I do,” Malfoy responded, looking offended. “The Triwizard Tournament is an incredibly important event!”

“I bet you still have some of those badges laying around.”

“I may even give you one, if you ask nicely,” Malfoy smirked.

The firebolt zoomed into Harry's hand. A funny thought made him snort.

“Once again, I'm summoning my broom to deal with a dragon.”

Malfoy threw his head back and laughed. It was a pure, genuine sound. When he stopped, Harry found himself wishing to hear Malfoy laugh again.

“That was actually clever. I didn't think you had it in you.”

“My, my, that was almost a compliment!” Harry drawled, imitating Malfoy’s silken tones.

“It most certainly was not,” Malfoy said, sticking up his nose.

After a few more minutes during which Harry watched Malfoy fly around the pitch, they headed back inside.

Chapter 17: Chapter 17

Harry yawned. Hermione and Ron were bickering fondly. Hermione had dragged them to the library to study and, as had happened the last few times, both she and Ron had promptly forgotten about Harry's existence. He finished the last line of his essay and gave his hand a shake.

Hermione and Ron were too engrossed in each other to notice or care much when Harry stood up and wandered over to the shelves. It had been a while since he'd read anything good. For once, he was actually caught up with all his homework. He drifted between rows of books, skimming titles. He caught a glimpse of white-blond hair at a back table. Malfoy. He was sitting by himself, poring over a thick tome. Harry wandered over.

"Potter," Malfoy sighed.

"Malfoy," Harry responded in tone.

Malfoy turned away.

"What are you reading?" Harry asked.

"Actually, I'm researching your… condition."

"I see," Harry nodded.

"Did you need something?" Malfoy asked snappily.

"Not really. I was looking for something to read. Do wizards have novels, or fiction?"

This question was enough to make Malfoy look up from the book. Under his appalled gaze, Harry felt like an idiot.

"*Do wizards have fiction?*" Malfoy asked, every word dripping with sarcasm. "Do dragons hoard gold, Potter?"

At Harry's clueless face, Malfoy's eyebrows flew up incredulously.

"You mean to tell me that you've never heard of Pauline Greenfern?"

Harry shook his head.

“Herbert Stone? Jacques DeRelie? Isabella Wandwell? Alexandr Charov?”

Harry shook his head. Malfoy sighed and rubbed his temples.

“*Of course he hasn't*– I expected as much from Weasley, he… doesn't follow traditions. I doubt he’d even know where the library was if it wasn’t for Granger. But Granger? She's a–”

Malfoy hesitated for an almost unnoticeable split second.

“A muggleborn,” he continued, “ …but she practically lives in the library!”

“Hermione isn't a fan of fiction. How do you expect her to know this?”

“But those are *classics!* This is our *culture!* It's a travesty that you haven't read any of it!”

Malfoy threw his arms up. He looked like he was about to march over to McGonagall and give her a lecture about how things were taught at Hogwarts. Harry was torn between amusement and alarm at the intensity of his emotions.

“Come with me, Potter,” Malfoy said. It clearly wasn’t a request.

He strode off between the shelves, muttering to himself. He led Harry to a small group of shelves and began heaping books into his arms.

“You *must* read this one! This one too. This one may be a bit too sophisticated for you, but you have to read it as well. It won’t kill you.”

Malfoy's eyes looked alive. The sharp angles of his face seemed to soften, glowing from within.

“You really like these books?” Harry asked.

“When I was a child, I spent my time at the manor reading these books. They remind me of… better days,” Malfoy explained haltingly.

Harry nodded. He could understand that.

“Thank you,” Harry said sincerely.

A look of surprise flashed across Malfoy's features. The next moment, his face was set in a familiar sneer, leaving Harry wondering if he had

imagined it.

“The sheer magnitude of your ignorance is an insult to everyone around you, Potter. Besides, it is the duty of every wizard to educate others of our kind.”

The pale boy turned and strode away.

That evening, Harry began one of the books. It was written in an incredibly wordy way, but it was definitely more entertaining than the chapter on the semantics of animal transfiguration that he’d had to take notes on for homework the other day. Hermione was very pleasantly surprised to see him with a book. She’d gone upstairs around eleven and given him a reproachful look when he’d said that he wasn’t tired, but Harry didn’t care. He was slowly getting sucked in.

The common room emptied around him. Harry had to cast *lumos* to continue seeing the pages clearly. He was so invested that he didn’t acknowledge the footsteps coming down the stairs until Malfoy sat down on the couch next to him.

“Which one is that?” Malfoy asked.

“The Sharpest Claw.”

Malfoy nodded, lowering his eyelids. Harry slipped a stray piece of parchment between the pages and closed the book, finally looking up.

“Let me guess, it's your favorite one,” Harry said.

“What makes you say that?” Malfoy asked. Harry could tell that he was right by the way the corner of Malfoy's lip lifted.

Harry chuckled.

“The main character is a prince with a dragon animagus form! He's basically you!”

Contrary to Harry’s expectation, Malfoy’s face fell abruptly.

“He's not like me at all,” Malfoy said sharply. “He's brave. He's the hero. He’s good.”

Harry jerked upright.

“You're good too!”

Malfoy laughed darkly.

“*Good?”*

He yanked up his left sleeve. The dark mark stood out, black against his pale arm.

“Does this look like the mark of someone good to you?”

“You didn't have a choice!”

“That's not an excuse.”

“You saved me at the manor,” Harry said quietly.

Malfoy folded his arms over his chest and looked away.

“You knew it was me. I know you did.”

“You don't know the things I've done,” Malfoy whispered.

“Yes, I do.”

Malfoy shook his head.

“Voldemort forced you to use the cruciatus on people.”

Malfoy's head shot up. He stared at Harry, shock prominent on his face.

“How do you–”

“I had a mental connection with Voldemort. I could see things with his eyes sometimes.”

“How much did you see?” Malfoy demanded frantically.

“Not much,” Harry assured. “I only saw him telling you to use crucio on a death eater once. He threatened to crucio *you* if you didn't.”

Malfoy shivered, rubbing his arms. Something like relief flashed in his eyes for a brief second.

“How can you talk to me?” he whispered after a long silence. “If you know, then how can you just…”

“You didn’t have a choice. We were all forced into the war. I'm not innocent either.”

“It's not the same.”

“I *killed people,* Malfoy!” Harry exploded.

He put his face in his hands, breathing hard.

He felt Malfoy listening.

“I killed people,” he repeated. “It wasn't just Voldemort. So many died because of me… Cedric, Fred, Remus, Sirius, Moody, Tonks! Hell, I almost killed *you!*”

A long silence hung. Finally, Malfoy broke it.

“I can't believe… How stupidly, enormously *daft* you are! You think all those people died because of *you?* It was all because of the dark lord! It was his fault! He started this war, not you!”

Malfoy leaped to his feet and began pacing.

“You saved people. You saved every single muggleborn in this school. You saved all the muggles. The people you listed? They knew the cost. They knew what they were fighting for. Everything you did, you did for a heroic cause!”

“That doesn’t bring them back, does it? It still happened, they’re all gone!”

“Potter. If not for you, all those people would have died anyway, and thousands more with them. You didn’t have a choice about any of this! Nobody asked if you wanted to be in the war!”

“Did anybody ask you?” Harry countered.

Malfoy turned away, crossing his arms. His huddled silhouette seemed small and fragile.

“I took the mark, didn’t I?” he asked quietly.

“You were sixteen.”

“And you were fifteen when you founded your little army. Oh, how I hated you that year. Precious Potter, always doing good, even when it hurts him,” Malfoy said. He didn’t seem like he was trying to offend.

He was merely stating facts. “Only Umbridge was worse than *you.*”

“Umbridge?” Harry asked, surprised. “But I thought…”

Malfoy’s face twisted in loathing.

“You thought I liked her? Oh, she *adored* me, made me head of her Inquisitorial Squad and all. No, I loathed her with every bone in my body. She was so *stupid.* Treated us like children. I almost died of boredom in her classes,” Malfoy sneered, sitting back down on the couch. The topic seemed to rejuvenate him. “That’s the year I knew I didn’t want to work in the ministry, if it meant having to obey people like *her.*”

“Then why did you?” Harry asked.

Malfoy’s face darkened.

“My father.”

After a short yet heavy silence, he continued.

“I really did want to catch your group. I fancied myself a hero, saving Hogwarts from your *dangerous ideas.*”

“But you said you hated Umbridge! Didn’t you see that she was ruining the school?”

“Of course I did,” Malfoy scoffed. “Still, the thought of your defense club made my blood boil. I couldn’t stand the thought that someone else was learning, and I wasn’t. I didn’t want anyone to get ahead of me, I suppose.”

“You could have joi–”

Harry bit his tongue. Malfoy chuckled humorlessly.

“I could have joined you? Even in the impossible scenario that I decided to try, do you think you would have accepted me with open arms? You’d have thought I was spying for Umbridge and been right to do so.”

“You could have done *something,* then,” Harry insisted.

“I did.”

Harry frowned in confusion.

“Since your little club was so *welcoming* to Slytherins, we ran our own meetings. Older snakes taught younger ones. Unlike *you,* we were never caught or found out,” Malfoy said proudly.

Harry bit back a retort that this was probably because they were all in the Inquisitorial Squad.

“Nobody told Umbridge, trying to get on her good side?” he asked instead.

Malfoy snorted.

“The other houses think *so well* of us. A nest of snakes, all willing to bite each other’s heads off for momentary benefits,” he drawled, sounding almost like his old self. “No, Potter, nobody told. First of all, everyone was smart enough to understand that combat skills would be more beneficial to them in the long run than Umbridge’s good graces. Second of all, our club gave us an edge over the other houses in the coming years. Third of all, we have house pride and solidarity. And finally…”

Malfoy smiled darkly.

“…we’d all have known where the traitor lived and have had direct access to both their living space and their sleeping body.”

Harry shivered. *Slytherins.* If *Hermione* was ruthless enough to spell SNEAK out on a traitor’s face in acne, he didn’t dare imagine what revenge *they* would have come up with.

“You met Mogilova, yes? She taught that club quite well, despite only being in third year. She learned quickly, too. I believe the club exists to this day, actually. Unofficially, of course. They tutor each other in different subjects.”

“Really?” Harry asked, surprised.

“No, I’m lying to you for fun,” Malfoy said, sarcasm dripping from every word. “Yes, really.”

He stood with catlike grace.

“I’m going to bed. Enjoy the book,” he tossed, before disappearing up the stairs.

Harry was feeling quite tired himself. The pale wizard’s unusual

talkativeness had lulled him into a drowsy state. He made his way up to his own room and sank into the sheets and blankets. His last thought before drifting off was that Malfoy must be really proud of the club, since he'd talked about it at such length. He'd forgotten to ask its name, he'd have to do that later…

Chapter 18: Chapter 18

“That's enough for today,” Harry said definitively.

He stood up and stretched. Malfoy didn't even look up from the cauldron.

“You're free to go.”

“Come on, you're coming too.”

“No.”

“But last time was fun! I know you had fun too, don't even try to pretend.”

“No, this time I actually must stay here. If I leave, a lot of today's work will go to waste.”

“Fine,” Harry sighed, flopping back down into his chair.

“What are you doing?” Malfoy asked, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

“Waiting for you to finish.”

Malfoy pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Why in the name of Merlin are you staying here? Aren't your little friends waiting for you?”

Harry shrugged.

“Ron and Hermione are together now. They have quite enough to do without me being there.”

Malfoy still looked skeptical, but he stopped arguing. He leaned over the potion and began to measure something.

“So, what are you doing?”

“I am trying to work, but a certain wizard is distracting me.”

“No, really, what are you doing?”

“If you must know, I am measuring whether the visible identifying qualities of the potion change alongside their effects,” Malfoy

drawled.

“Visible identifying qualities?”

“Viscosity, color, smell, taste,” Malfoy listed.

“Alright. Why is this important?” Harry asked genuinely.

Malfoy looked up briefly, his gray eyes narrowed.

“When I determine how they change, it will be easier for me to brew potions that work for you specifically. I may be able to tell that they're correct simply by comparing color, viscosity, and the others.”

“And why can't this be done later?”

“Because I'm doing it now,” Malfoy snapped.

After a few moments of silence, Harry reached into his bag and pulled out his book. He opened it to his page, and began to read.

He felt Malfoy's eyes on him for a few moments. Then, the pale boy returned to whatever he was doing.

The two of them lapsed into a comfortable silence, which was filled only by the quiet bubble of the cauldron and the occasional flipping of a page. Harry was getting increasingly invested in the story and in the exploits of the dragon prince.

“Oh *no*,” Harry muttered out loud.

“What is it?”

“The book. The king is sending a hunting party into the mountains to hunt the dragon, and *Leonore* volunteered to lead it!”

“Ah.”

Harry read with mounting horror.

“*No*!” he exclaimed a few chapters later.

“Did it happen?”

“Leonore wounded him! She's about to kill him!”

“So it didn't happen quite yet.”

Harry devoured the next few pages. Leonore killed the wounded dragon, and with his last breath, the prince assumed his human form. Stricken with grief, Leonore killed herself.

“This is *not* a happy ending!”

“Were you expecting one?”

“I hate you,” Harry grumbled jokingly. “Why would you give me a book like this? What is this, wizard Romeo and Juliet?”

“Who?” Malfoy asked.

Harry stared at him incredulously.

“How are you so posh, dramatic, and pretentious without having read Shakespeare?”

“You are truly a master of compliments,” Malfoy said wryly. “Is it a muggle book?”

“Yes. To be honest, I never read it either,” Harry admitted.

“*Harry Potter* hasn't read something posh and pretentious? That is truly shocking, I might just faint,” Malfoy drawled sarcastically.

Harry rolled his eyes.

“Git.”

“Very creative.”

“The book ended. Are you done yet?”

“Yes, actually.”

Malfoy put out the fire under the cauldron, magically cleaned his table, and lifted his things.

“Quidditch?” Harry offered.

“It's a bit late for that,” Malfoy said.

Harry cast tempus.

“How is it so late already? Bloody hell, we missed dinner.”

Malfoy shrugged.

“I know where we can eat,” Harry said.

“Congratulations. Go do that, then.”

“You're not coming?”

“No.”

“But you haven’t eaten lunch! You need to eat something.”

Malfoy looked incredibly annoyed.

“I am not going to leave you alone until you agree.”

“*Fine*, Potter!”

Harry led Malfoy through the corridors toward the kitchens. When they reached the fruit portrait, Harry tickled the pear and they entered. House elves bustled around them, cooking and scrubbing plates. Malfoy looked impressed as he surveyed the space. Then, he saw Harry looking at him and quickly sneered.

A house elf stopped in front of Harry.

“What can we be getting for Mister Potter and his friend?”

Malfoy looked like he was going to argue the second point, but he held his tongue.

Harry listed some food items to the house elf, and he rushed off. He came back a few moments later, carrying plates of food. Harry passed one to Malfoy.

“How did you know?” Malfoy asked.

“The Weasley twins showed me when I was–”

“No, not that,” Malfoy said with an impatient wave of his hand. “How did you know what foods I like?”

“Oh.”

Harry looked at Malfoy’s plate. He shrugged.

“I don’t know. I just do.”

“You like treacle tart. Why in Merlin's name do I know that?” Malfoy

asked. He looked annoyed at his newly discovered knowledge.

Harry shrugged.

After eating, the two of them returned to the common room. After a quick goodbye, Harry joined Ron and Hermione where they were sitting in armchairs.

“Harry! We were worried about you! You didn't eat dinner,” Hermione said.

“I ate in the kitchens,” Harry assured.

Hermione looked a bit happier.

“Were you with Malfoy?” Ron asked.

“Yeah. He's helping me with potions, remember?”

“I know that, but it's late already.”

“Yes, and?” Harry asked. His patience was wearing thin.

“Nothing,” Hermione said, putting a hand on Ron's knee. Ron didn't look happy, but he dropped the subject.

Chapter 19: Chapter 19

An eagle owl flew up to Harry during dinner, with a note tied to the leg. It stayed to the side from all of the owls bearing fan mail, looking at them with the occasional derisive hoot. Just by that, Harry guessed who it was from.

He untied the note from its leg and skimmed the elegant handwriting.

Potter,

I require your presence in the brewing room tonight in order to finish a test we began yesterday. If I do not get a response, I will assume that eight o'clock is convenient for you. If not, tell me what time you are free.

Draco L. Malfoy

Of course the git sent him an entire letter instead of just coming up to him and saying it.

"Who's that from?" Ron asked.

"Malfoy. He needs something for the potion thing."

"Very specific, Harry," Hermione snickered.

"I don't know, he just said he needs me there," Harry said defensively.

"Good, you're here. Breathe on this for two seconds, this for five seconds, and this for exactly one minute and thirty seconds," Malfoy said the second Harry entered. Harry cast a tempus and began. Malfoy rushed around, doing who-knows-what.

When he finally sat down to write something, Harry spoke.

"We should get going."

"You can leave without me, you know," Malfoy said absentmindedly.

"No. Last time I did that, you almost got killed!"

Harry immediately sensed that it had been the wrong thing to say. Malfoy's face turned cold, and he drew himself up to his superior height.

“Is that why you insisted on dragging me to the quidditch pitch the other day? Out of a misguided need to save everyone that crosses your path? You think I'll get myself murdered if our *precious savior* isn't there to rescue me?” Malfoy spat.

“No, I-”

“I don't need your protection, Potter. You can go now.”

“That's not what I meant!”

“You're done for today. Leave.”

Malfoy pointed at the door. Harry hesitated.

“*Leave*.”

Harry spun on his heel and stalked out the door. *Precious savior*, was he? He had a *misguided need* to help everyone? Of course *Malfoy* wouldn't understand something as simple as helping people.

Harry thought in that vein all through his path to his room. He flopped down on his bed and reflexively grabbed the marauder's map. He tapped it and found Malfoy’s dot. He was still in the potions room.

See how he likes sitting inside all by himself, Harry thought spitefully.

If he spent the rest of the evening checking the marauder's map, it was *not* because he cared what happened to Malfoy.

Harry shot upright, a scream on his lips. He had dreamed about the fire in the room of requirement. Malfoy stood in the flames, but no matter how hard Harry tried, he couldn’t get close enough to take his hand. Something cracked, and Malfoy fell down, down, into the fire.

Harry remembered their fight yesterday and groaned out loud. He had been so *stupid*. Of course Malfoy would get upset! Harry had practically told him that he was only spending time with him because otherwise, Malfoy would get into some kind of trouble! Then he had spent all afternoon *sulking*.

Harry decided to fix this. He got up and walked down to the common room, just in case Malfoy was there. He wasn’t. Harry waited for thirty minutes, then an hour. Malfoy did not show up. Harry finally decided to go back to his room and try to make amends tomorrow.

Malfoy wasn't at breakfast, or lunch. Harry quickly ate, then sped away to his room, excusing himself by muttering something about a book he'd forgotten. Instead of the imaginary book, Harry pulled out the marauder's map. He searched it for Malfoy, and finally found him. He was out by the lake, alone. Though Harry wanted to go outside and talk to him, he had to go to charms. After charms, he had defense with Malfoy, so he'd see him there.

Harry's hopes were quickly dashed. He didn't get a chance to talk to Malfoy at all. It was the fourth and final class they were spending on patronuses, so everyone was desperate to get theirs right. Malfoy wouldn't even look at him. Harry was very busy with the other students, which he'd normally like, but not today.

The class was almost over. Harry had to act now, before Malfoy started avoiding him again. Professor Thrushton was speaking, so the class was distracted. Harry pulled out a random piece of parchment and scribbled the words *Common room tonight. -Harry.* He balled it up, sidled to the back of the classroom, near Malfoy's seat, and threw it at him. The paper landed on his desk. Malfoy vanished it without looking.

Harry gritted his teeth in annoyance. He supposed that Malfoy hadn't seen who the note was from. He wrote the same thing again. This time, when he folded it, he wrote *MALFOY, READ THIS* on the front. He levitated it over to Malfoy's desk.

Malfoy was about to sweep it to the floor, but hesitated upon seeing the words on the front. He lifted the note, then looked around and saw Harry. Harry pointedly looked at the paper, then back at Malfoy.

Malfoy started unfolding the paper just as Professor Thrushton dismissed the class. The students began to stream out of the class, blocking Malfoy's reaction from view.

“Potter, Malfoy, stay for a moment,” Professor Thrushton called.

Harry could have kissed her. He and Malfoy approached her desk.

“Malfoy, I see that you’ve been having trouble with your patronus,” she said.

Malfoy nodded stiffly.

“A patronus will be part of your final exam. It may lower your grade if you cannot perform one. This is why I am assigning Potter to tutor

you. You can figure out your schedule yourselves. Let me know what it is once you decide."

"Alright," Harry said.

"You may go."

Harry paused for a moment to pick up his things. When he looked up, Malfoy was gone. Harry could only hope that he would show up.

Harry belatedly realized that he hadn't specified a time on his paper. He grabbed his invisibility cloak out of his trunk and snuck into the common room at eleven. Morag MacDougal was curled up in an armchair with a book, reading by wandlight. Harry sighed. The Ravenclaw didn't look ready to leave anytime soon. Harry decided to give him a little nudge. He walked over to the shelves, picked the thickest one he could find, and dropped it on the floor with a loud crash. Morag jumped. He tore his eyes away from the book and looked around in confusion. He checked the time.

"Merlin's beard," he cursed.

Harry watched him disappear up the stairs and sat down on the couch by the fire. He was sure that he wouldn't fall asleep because of all the thoughts in his head, but he was wrong.

Harry woke up from a heavy object dropping on him.

"What the *fuck?!"*

That and more creative swearing accompanied Harry's awakening. His sleep-addled brain scrambled to make sense of what was going on.

Harry realized that he was still wearing the invisibility cloak. He had fallen asleep in it and Malfoy must have accidentally sat down on him.

Harry jumped to his feet and yanked off the cloak. Malfoy's mouth fell open. He even stopped cursing.

"Hello," Harry said eloquently.

"*Potter?"*

Harry nodded.

"You are an absolute menace," Malfoy said.

“Sorry,” Harry apologized.

Malfoy shut his eyes and took a few deep breaths through his nose.

“What in Merlin’s name did you want?” Malfoy asked.

Harry took a deep breath.

“In the dungeons, I didn't mean that I only wanted to play quidditch because of what happened to you. I don’t think you’re weak, and I know you don’t need me to protect you. I want to play quidditch with you because we're friends.”

Malfoy looked at Harry strangely.

“You think of me as your friend?” he asked quietly.

“Sure. Do you reckon we're friends?”

Malfoy hesitated.

“Yes,” he said carefully, as though trying the word out. “You never said that before, so I assumed…”

Malfoy shrugged.

“Oh, I never said it before? Of course you need a royal invitation to be friends,” Harry snorted. “Wait, let me remember how you did it.”

Malfoy's eyebrows rose. Harry theatrically stretched out his hand, attempting to keep a serious face.

“Draco Lucius Malfoy, would you do me the honor of being my friend?”

Malfoy rolled his eyes and sighed. Finally, he shook Harry’s hand. His palm was smooth and cold.

“You are insufferable, Potter,” he sneered.

“You can call me Harry, you know,” Harry said.

Harry waited for Malfoy to respond, raising his eyebrows expectantly. Malfoy exhaled.

“You may call me by my first name as well, if you must,” he allowed.

Harry grinned.

“Thanks, Draco.”

At the end of their next brewing session, Harry was ready. He and Draco had decided that it would make sense for Harry to tutor him after they finished with potions, since they were together anyway.

“Can I see you try a patronus again?”

Draco sighed. He closed his eyes, and after a moment, cast the spell. Nothing happened.

“Well, like I've told you, your wand movement is perfect. The problem must be with the memory. You need to use something very happy.”

Draco looked incredibly annoyed already.

“I can't do it, Potter. I cannot cast a patronus.”

“That's ridiculous. Everyone can cast a patronus with enough practice!”

“Well I can't, alright?”

Draco raised his voice.

“What's the problem?” Harry asked.

“It's the fucking memories!”

“What about them?”

“They’re all broken.”

Harry tilted his head quizzically. How could a memory be broken?

“What memory have you been using?”

“I’ve tried many.”

“Give me an example.”

Draco glared at him.

“Brewing my first potion,” he spat.

“Can you explain how it’s broken?”

“I start off by remembering how I brewed the potion with Severus. But then, I start thinking about how Severus was a death eater. Then, I start thinking about how the Dark Lord killed him. And then, I start thinking about the Dark Lord.”

Draco stopped. His face twisted with rage.

“I hate him! I can’t even enjoy Malfoy Manor because he tortured and killed people there! It was my home, and he ruined it! He ruined my house, he ruined Hogwarts, and he ruined me.”

“Draco-”

“Look at this!”

Draco yanked up his sleeve, exposing the dark mark marring his arm.

“*He* did this to me! A death eater is all I'll ever be. He took my future.”

Draco took a deep breath.

“So *no*, Potter. I can’t cast a patronus.”

Harry was still reeling from all this information.

“That’s enough for today, then,” he said.

He needed to get out of the castle.

“Let’s go for a fly. Clear our heads.”

After a moment, Draco nodded.

Harry and Draco walked out of the castle in stiff silence, only to see the Hufflepuff team practicing on the pitch.

Harry swore.

“I should have known. Their first match is coming up.”

Draco shrugged.

“We can still fly around,” Harry suggested.

“On the school brooms? Absolutely not.”

“What do you suggest then?”

“We have legs, we can walk.”

Harry nodded. Draco led the way toward the pond.

“I hope the weather is good at the match,” Harry said, attempting to steer the conversation to lighter topics.

The autumn air was crisp and cool.

“I suppose it would be nice for the people there.”

“You're going, right?”

“I was not planning to.”

“What?” Harry exclaimed, latching on to the topic. “You have to go!”

“Do I?”

“You'll have fun. It will be good for you.”

“You think you know what's good for me, do you, Potter?”

“I told you to call me Harry. Stop changing the subject. You were always in the stands, cheering for whatever team Gryffindor was playing against!”

“You're not on the team anymore,” Draco said.

Harry blinked, processing the statement. A grin spread across his face.

“Are you saying you only watched because I was on the team?” he asked delightedly.

Draco's cheeks tinged red.

“Of course not, that's absurd!” he denied.

“You admitted it already!”

“I found it amusing when you made a fool of yourself,” Draco said. His icy tone did not match the blush continuing to creep up his face.

“I did not make a fool of myself!” Harry argued.

“I seem to recall a certain someone falling off his broom during a

match with Hufflepuff."

"That was one time! There were dementors! And speaking of dementors, I also remember a certain someone pretending to be a dementor in order to sabotage a match!"

Draco buried his face in his hands.

"I was *fourteen*," he said in a muffled voice.

"The dementors send their love, Potter," Harry sneered, imitating Draco's intonations.

"Shut up."

"I also remember someone not noticing the snitch right next to his head in second year!"

"That was my *first game*. I was scared out of my wits!"

"You were?"

Harry frowned. Malfoy had seemed very cocky and confident.

"Well, I wasn't about to admit it, was I?"

Harry nodded. He remembered his feelings during his own first game. His team had been there to cheer him up and they'd had his back. His friends had been in the stands with posters. Harry somehow doubted that Marcus Flint had consoled Draco before *his* first game.

"Poor Ron was terrified before his first game, too," Harry said.

"Weasley is our king," Draco hummed.

"That was cruel of you," Harry frowned.

"Yes, it was. I was a prat," Draco said shortly.

"Did you write the song yourself?" Harry asked.

Draco nodded. Harry snorted, imagining him sitting in the Slytherin common room, very seriously coming up with the lyrics.

"So… will you go to the match?" Harry asked.

"I suppose I will," Draco sighed dramatically.

Harry grinned.

“Do you reckon Hufflepuff will beat Gryffindor?” he asked.

“I haven't seen either new team,” Draco responded.

Harry and Draco strolled around the lake, debating quidditch. When they got back to the castle, Harry realized with some surprise that he didn't want the walk to end. He was having a truly good time. However, a charms essay loomed over him, and he knew Hermione would kill him if he didn't at least start it tonight. He and Draco parted in the common room and retired to their separate rooms.

Chapter 20: Chapter 20

Before Harry could blink, the day of the match arrived. Harry waited in the common room, bouncing on his toes. Draco had said that he would go to the quidditch match, and Harry would hold him to that promise. Everyone else had already left, where the hell was Draco? Harry had already put on his coat, but now he was regretting that decision. It was hot.

Harry's patience ran out. He sped up the stairs and knocked on Draco's door. Draco opened it right away. A cloak was draped over his arm. Draco stepped out and shut the door behind him.

"Come on, we're going to be late!" Harry said.

He grabbed Draco's hand and tugged him toward the stairs.

"Slow down, Potter!" Draco snapped, stumbling after.

Harry slowed down by a fraction of a percent for about half a second, before picking up speed again. However, that had been enough for Draco, who caught his balance and strode briskly next to Harry. Harry realized he was still holding Draco's hand and quickly released it.

Now, Harry was the one who had to run to keep up with Draco's long strides. The tall boy only paused next to the castle entrance to put on his warm cloak. He also pulled out a pair of gloves and a Slytherin scarf. Harry, who had only gotten hotter after their run through the corridors, unzipped the front of his coat to let in the cool air.

Together, they walked out of the castle and into the quidditch stands.

"Hey, where are you going?" Harry asked.

"The Slytherin stands," Draco replied, giving Harry a strange look.

"No, you're not. You're coming with me."

Harry took Draco by the elbow to not get lost in the crowd, and pulled him toward where he had seen Ron's red hair. Draco followed reluctantly.

"Harry, where have you been? We saved you a seat!" Hermione greeted, patting a spot next to her.

“Hello, Harry… Malfoy?” Ron said quizzically.

“Yes. Hello Neville, Luna,” Harry greeted.

Luna waved. Neville greeted the two of them with some confusion, but no hostility.

Draco stood stiffly, nodding in response to greetings with a haughty expression glued to his face. Harry could see that he was desperately uncomfortable.

“Budge up,” he said to a girl sitting next to his saved seat. The girl tried to move, but the stands were packed.

“It's fine, I'll go sit with my house,” Draco said.

“There's a seat over there,” Harry pointed, ignoring Draco. The girl stood and scurried away, looking terrified.

“Sorry,” he called after her.

He sat down, pulling Draco into the seat the girl vacated.

“You didn't have to do that,” Draco said into Harry's ear.

Harry shrugged.

“I wanted to. She’s fine, she found a spot.”

The match began. Madam Hooch blew her whistle, the quaffle flew into the air, and Ginny snatched it. Harry cheered as she dodged a bludger hit by the Hufflepuff beater and flew toward the hoops.

Ginny scored. Harry leaped to his feet, whooping. Draco scowled.

Hufflepuff scored next. Out of the two players Harry saw during tryouts, the girl was keeper for Gryffindor today. She blocked the second quaffle hurled by a Hufflepuff chaser to cheers from the crowd.

At first, Draco sat stiffly and watched the game in silence with an expression of mild disgust on his face. Harry even began to regret dragging Draco over to sit with him. But as the game went on, Draco became less and less tense. When the Hufflepuff keeper blocked a quaffle, he actually clapped.

“Look!” Draco pointed somewhere off to the side.

Harry looked, and saw the golden snitch! Apparently, the Gryffindor seeker saw it too. So did the Hufflepuff seeker. They hurtled after the snitch side by side, both reaching for it, and…

“THE GRYFFINDOR SEEKER CATCHES THE SNITCH! GRYFFINDOR WINS WITH A SCORE OF 180 TO 40!” shouted the new commentator, a Hufflepuff third year. He had done a good job, though his commentary wasn't quite as colorful as Lee Jordan's.

“Yes!” Ron shouted, pumping his fists.

Harry moved away from him to avoid being smacked in the face. He bumped directly into Draco, who had done the same to avoid the overly enthusiastic boy to his right.

“Sorry,” Harry said.

“It's alright, Harry,” Draco responded.

Harry grinned at Draco's use of his name. It still felt strange to hear. He was suddenly very aware of his shoulder brushing against Draco's, even through their coats. The sounds of the crowd faded into the background as he met Draco's eyes. Draco was smiling. In his green Slytherin scarf, he stood out from the red and gold crowd around them. Harry felt his grin grow even wider.

“We won!” Ron shouted into Harry's ear, slinging his arm over Harry's shoulder.

Harry let himself be pulled into the wild celebration. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Draco stand up and disappear into the crowd. His green scarf flashed through the crowd as he walked in the direction of the castle. Harry felt a pang in his chest, but was quickly distracted by the festivities. Harry was dragged down to the teams, where he congratulated them. Ginny hugged him, then raced off in a blur of red hair. She had scored most of the goals that day.

Harry and the other eighth-years were enveloped by a quickly growing crowd that flooded toward the Gryffindor common room.

Once inside the common room, Harry broke out of the festivities. He leaned on the wall and closed his eyes. A powerful wave of nostalgia crashed over him. He felt like an iron band was tightening around his chest, squeezing his heart. For years, this room had been his home. He had studied here, played chess with Ron here, opened his first real Christmas gifts here. He remembered when he had been at the center

of festivities just like these after catching his first snitch. Memory after memory dragged him under, bringing tears to his eyes. Those days were gone forever. He suddenly felt with razor-sharp clarity that he would never belong here again.

Ever.

Even now, he felt separate from his housemates.

Harry longed to stay for longer, but every second he spent in the Gryffindor common room stabbed into his heart. He pushed through the people and leaped out of the portrait hole. It swung shut behind him, muffling the sounds of the party. Harry walked away, letting his feet carry him. He could barely see where he was going past the tears stinging his eyes. He felt more alone than ever before, more than in second year when he was accused of being the heir of Slytherin, more than during the triwizard tournament.

The sense of loneliness only grew, bubbled under his skin, ready to overflow. Harry wanted to scream, cry, or kick something. Maybe all at once.

Harry approached the owl painting. It blinked mournfully at him.

“Galleon,” he said thickly.

The portrait swung open. Harry entered the eighth-year common room, hoping it would be empty. It wasn't.

Draco turned as the door opened. It was strange to see him in the common room during the day.

“Why aren't you celebrating?” Draco asked.

Harry pressed his lips together to hide the tremble and shrugged. He didn't trust himself to speak.

“Are you alright?” Draco asked carefully.

Harry nodded, turning his face away from Draco. He walked up the stairs and into his room, slamming the door behind him. It didn't help.

Harry flopped down on his bed and let out a muffled, angry sound. It sounded more like a sob than anything else.

Chapter 21: Chapter 21

Draco was irritated. Ever since Harry had started eating at the Slytherin table, it had gotten harder and harder to sit by himself. People from other houses had slowly begun joining their table too, and while Draco was happy for his house, he didn't like that the other students were pulling closer to his seat. Thankfully, Draco's reputation guaranteed him a bubble of empty space even more effectively than a shield charm would have. The students sitting near him pointedly did not look in his direction. Even the insults and occasional jinxes had stopped after McGonagall's wrathful speech.

Despite this, Draco felt the difference. Instead of eating in the Great Hall, he grabbed an apple off the table and headed to the library, vanishing the core on the doorstep. Madam Pince was a force to be reckoned with and did not tolerate anything of the edible sort within her space.

Draco had exactly three minutes and sixteen seconds of peace before Harry entered the library. He looked around before his eyes locked on Draco.

“Hey, Draco!” Harry greeted with a grin.

Draco greeted him with a glare.

“Potter.”

Harry plopped down at the table next to him, running a hand through his messy, dark hair.

“Honestly, have you ever even *seen* a comb?” Draco asked, unable to resist.

“Comb? What's that?” Harry asked, sparks of mirth dancing in his emerald eyes.

Draco tried to hold on to his anger, but when faced with that smile, it was forced into a hasty retreat.

“What do you want?” he asked, injecting annoyance into his voice.

“Tomorrow is a Hogsmeade day,” Harry said.

“And?” Draco drawled, raising a brow. He was not planning to make

Harry's job any easier.

“Zabini is going, and Parkinson too. You should come!”

Draco shook his head.

“I have too much homework,” he lied without blinking an eye.

“For what class?”

“Potions and Arithmancy.”

“You expect me to believe that someone as smart as you can't finish his homework another day?”

“Flattery, Potter?” Draco asked, lifting a brow.

“Is it working?” Harry asked eagerly.

“No.”

“Oh come on, it’s going to be fun!”

“We have very different definitions of fun.”

“Please?”

Draco sighed.

“No, I actually have plans. Truly.”

“What are they?”

Harry was so *nosy*. No manners whatsoever.

“Something Lovegood showed me,” Draco admitted.

“You're not hunting for wrackspurts, I hope?” Harry asked.

Those wrackspurt things again. What *were* they?

“No.”

“What, then?”

Draco studied Harry, considering. If he told Harry, chances were he'd ask to accompany him. If he didn't, Harry would go to Lovegood and probably find out anyway. He could, of course, just tell Harry that he

didn't want company, but then Harry would look at him with those sad green eyes…

The company might not be horrible. The Forbidden Forest was still… not Draco's favorite place in the world.

“If you want, I'll show you,” Draco decided.

Harry’s eyes lit up. It was not endearing, Draco told himself strictly.

“Yeah!”

“Alright. Meet me near the lake after breakfast tomorrow.”

When Harry appeared on the horizon, Draco had been waiting in the cold for some time now. Harry waved to him, Gryffindor scarf flapping in the wind. Draco didn't wave back. It was undignified.

“This way,” he said when Harry crossed the distance between them.

Harry fell into step with him.

“The Forbidden Forest?” he asked, looking where they were going.

Draco nodded.

“Scared?” he mocked. *Hypocrite*, a voice in his head chided.

“No, I just thought you didn't like the forest.”

“That was in first year, Potter.”

Harry shrugged.

“Poor Neville, you frightened him out of his wits that day.”

“He was certainly avenged,” Draco muttered.

A chill ran down his spine at the memory of the hooded creature drinking unicorn blood.

“You ran so fast,” Harry snickered.

“I truly thought you were right behind me. I didn't realize you were stupid enough to actually stay there, with that thing. When I realized you weren't with me, that was terrifying. I was all alone in that forest for a good while. The dog doesn't count.”

“Yeah. That was certainly an adventure,” Harry chuckled.

“I still can't believe they sent us into the forest. We were *first years!* We could have been seriously hurt! They *knew* that something was hunting a unicorn, and they still sent us there, *and* they split us up, too! There wasn't even a professor with us!” Draco ranted.

“Have you been writing that speech since first year?” Harry snorted.

“Shut up, Potter. You know I'm right.”

Dry leaves crunched underfoot as the two wizards entered the forbidden forest.

“First year was fun,” Harry sighed. “Remember how you challenged me to a duel?”

Draco smirked.

“That was quite devious of me. I can't believe you didn't get caught.”

Harry nodded, memories clouding his eyes.

“I was furious when you became seeker,” Draco said, shaking his head. “I was planning to be the first seeker in our year, I'd flown before and all. And then *you* came around…”

“I really did steal all the glory, didn't I?” Harry asked guiltily.

Draco waved a hand, rolling his eyes.

“Who cares? I *wish* that was my biggest problem in life.”

“Yeah.”

Draco allowed himself a nostalgic smile. He'd been so innocent, trying to catch Harry doing something wrong so everyone would finally see who the *true* hero was. And speaking of…

“I've been wondering for *years*, why on earth did you have a dragon in first year?”

Harry laughed aloud.

“Oh, that? Hagrid hatched one in his hut.”

Draco’s brows flew up.

“His hut is made of *wood!”*

“That's what Hermione said,” Harry grinned. “We had to get rid of it. You remember, you found the letter.”

“Oh yes, I was very dedicated. I tried to tell people, but nobody believed me.”

“So you snuck out to catch us yourself.”

“Well I couldn't let you endanger the school, could I?”

“Very heroic,” Harry said with a straight face.

Draco slowed, looking around. This seemed to be the clearing.

“Are we there?” Harry asked, glancing around curiously.

“I think we might have scared them off.”

Any creature would have heard them talking like two dimwitted fools.

Draco looked around one final time, disappointed, when he saw them.

“There,” he whispered, pointing.

Harry turned.

“Thestrals!”

Draco nodded.

One by one, the thestrals stepped out from the shadow of the gnarled, twisted trees. Muscle rippled under their smooth hides. They were gorgeous creatures. To Draco's surprise, they all flocked to Harry. He stepped back as they surrounded him, nuzzling at his face and hands. Harry laughed as the youngest one butted its head against his side, wanting to be stroked.

“This didn't happen last time,” Harry said, trying to pet them all at once.

“Maybe they can sense that you… The potion effect,” Draco amended.

Harry ignored his slip of the tongue.

“Maybe,” he agreed quietly.

Draco approached one of the thestrals on the edge of the circle. He thought she was the one he'd seen the very first time. She gave Draco a sideways look, but allowed him to stroke her.

“Do you come here often?” Harry asked.

“Not really. I've only been here thrice, the first time was with Lovegood.”

“Thank you for showing me.”

“You're welcome.”

Harry turned back to the thestrals, crooning soothing nonsense at them.

“Aren't you the prettiest? Brooms are more comfortable to fly on but you're better, aren't you?”

Draco blinked.

“You've flown on a thestral before?” he asked, interrupting Harry’s flow of words.

“Yeah. I've flown on a lot of things, come to think of it. Thestrals, hippogriffs, even a dragon once.”

“A *dragon*?!”

“Yeah.”

“*Where?!”*

“Gringotts.”

“Oh.”

Draco remembered hearing something about that. The dark lord had not been happy…

Draco shuddered.

“Brooms are still my favorite,” Harry said.

The young thestral whinnied angrily.

“But you're the best anyway,” Harry assured it.

“I remember you riding the hippogriff,” Draco said. “Third year. Vicious beasts.”

“Hey! Hippogriffs are amazing!”

“One almost tore my arm off.”

“You insulted it!”

Draco sent Harry an incredulous look, turning away from the thestral.

“I bowed to it, it bowed back. I was petting it, and I casually called it something. A brute, if I remember correctly? The thing decided that was reason enough to maul me, so the next moment I'm on the ground, bleeding *heavily*. How am *I* in the wrong?”

“Well–”

“I was *thirteen.*”

Harry fell silent for a long moment.

“They *are* dangerous, but… I don't know! Everyone else was fine, weren’t they!”

“Oh, and that's alright then? Thank Merlin it was *Malfoy* that got hurt, at least it was only a Slytherin!”

“Stop it, that's not true. It would have been better if nobody had gotten hurt. But your father was going to execute the thing!”

“And how would you have reacted if the same thing had happened to your precious Weasley? He could have easily insulted the hippogriff. Merlin knows that if he got a sickle every time he spoke without thinking–”

Draco had been about to snap that “he'd be able to afford an actual house”, but he cut himself off.

“...he'd be rich,” he said lamely.

Harry sighed.

“Fine. Fine! It all ended well anyway.”

Draco turned back to the thestral.

“I'm going back to the castle. I really do have homework,” he said.

“I'll come too. I still have that essay for charms…”

“You haven't written that yet?!”

Harry grimaced. Draco gave his thestral a final pat and tugged Harry out of the clearing.

“That essay was assigned a *week* ago!”

Chapter 22: Chapter 22

Harry rubbed his eyes, throwing down his quill. He was sick and tired of transfiguration. He had been researching his stupid essay for the last *hour,* and Hermione wasn't even there to help. He'd left her poring over a thick advanced arithmancy text in the common room.

His eyes wandered around the library, and he saw a strange commotion. A group of first-years, Nora among them, were pushing and whispering amongst themselves. They kept shooting sideways glances at Harry. He was used to attention, but this was a bit different.

Finally, the group meandered over to him, pointedly looking anywhere else. He watched them approach with amusement, wondering where this was going. Maybe they wanted an autograph, Harry thought with dread.

"Good afternoon," Nora greeted politely. She was standing unnaturally straight.

"Good afternoon," Harry responded.

"Professor Potter, sir, We wanted to ask…"

Nora hesitated. A girl behind her that Harry didn't know but remembered from the sorting elbowed her.

"Call me Harry," Harry said. Professor Potter sounded way too formal.

Nora nodded.

"Couldyouhelpuswithaspell?" she blurted out.

"What?"

"Could you help us with a spell?" A boy chimed from behind her.

"A spell? Yeah, of course!"

Harry felt slightly guilty for thinking they'd want autographs.

"What spell?"

"The verdimillious charm."

Harry looked around the library. He didn't think Madam Pince would be too happy if they started shooting green sparks in the middle of the library.

“Let's go outside,” he said. Outside the window, the sky was a brilliant blue.

The flock of first-years followed him through the halls of Hogwarts and onto the grounds. The cool November air hit Harry’s skin. He inhaled the clear, fresh air and turned to the kids.

“Watch my hand movement. *Verdimillious!”*

Harry moved his wand in a forward slash. Green sparks erupted from the tip.

“Now you try.”

The first years lined up and began casting.

“You there, what's your name?”

“Mona.”

“Mona, keep your arm a bit steadier, like this.”

Harry demonstrated.

“And you, Knobble, right?”

“Nathan Knobble.”

“Nathan, you're flicking your wrist too hard. This isn't *wingardium leviosa.*”

Nathan fixed the motion, and a fountain of sparks erupted from his wand.

“Great! Just keep practicing, and you'll all get it.”

About half an hour later, all the kids were getting sparks to fly out of their wands.

“Five points to each of your houses,” Harry said.

“Thank you, sir!” The first-years chorused.

Harry watched them run off with a wistful smile.

The next day, a group of young Gryffindors approached Harry, asking him for help with a different spell. The day after, more people came up to him.

“The younger kids really seem to like you,” Hermione noted after Harry returned from helping another group.

“Yeah.”

“Why don't you restart the DA as a tutoring club?” she suggested.

Harry could kiss her.

“Have I ever told you that you're a genius?” he asked.

Hermione nodded with a pleased smile.

Harry went to Professor McGonagall that very day. She approved the club, and made an announcement at dinner. She helped Harry find a time when no quidditch teams were practicing, and the first club meeting occurred on the next day. Thursday, five in the evening.

At lunch the next day, Harry sat down at the Slytherin table. Zalina was sitting in her usual spot, nose buried in a book. From his experience with Hermione, Harry knew very well how people reacted when distracted from reading, but unfortunately he had an important question for the Slytherin prefect.

“Hey, Zalina,” he greeted.

“Good afternoon,” she responded, looking up.

“So, I heard that sometimes Slytherins tutor each other and that you’re part of that,” Harry began.

Zalina nodded.

“You’ve been stealing my job with that,” she joked. “My snakelings told me how you’ve been helping them.”

“Sorry,” Harry said, rubbing the back of his neck.

“It’s fine. Between all my classes and homework, Merlin knows I could use some help tutoring them. At least I dropped quidditch this year,” Zalina said.

“You played quidditch?” Harry asked. He was sure he’d never seen Zalina play in a match.

“I was on the reserve team. I was never that good at it, anyway,” Zalina shrugged.

Harry stored the information away for later, refocusing on the matter at hand.

“Anyway… I don’t know if you heard McGonagall announce that we’re starting a club–”

“I heard.”

“So, I was thinking maybe you could come, and bring the Slytherins? Or maybe if you want, you could even help teach the club.”

For a few moments, Zalina looked at Harry very carefully. He tried not to squirm under her piercing gaze.

“Don’t get me wrong, I personally would love to help. Count me in. But some of us may be… less enthusiastic. There’s a reason why we tend to keep to ourselves,” she said slowly. “The other houses don’t necessarily welcome us with open arms.”

“That’s what I want to fix,” Harry said.

Zalina nodded thoughtfully.

“I’ll talk to the others, see who I can get. But if something goes wrong… You understand.”

“Thank you,” Harry said.

Zalina nodded, eyes brightening.

“Now, about this DA thing. What exactly are you planning to cover? How is it going to be organized?”

Harry stood in the empty classroom provided for the club and waited for people to show up. He had transfigured some crude dummies in the back of the room for target practice. Hermione and Ron both had homework to do, but Neville had promised to be there. The Patil twins arrived first.

“Hello Padma, Parvati,” Harry greeted.

“Hello,” they responded in unison.

“We're not here because we need help,” Padma said.

“We're here in case you need help helping the younger students,” Parvati added.

“Great!” Harry grinned. The more, the merrier.

The classroom began to fill up as kids from all years filed in. Among them was a group of Slytherins, led by Zalina.

“Harry,” she greeted, striding up to the desk at the front.

“Hey, Zalina! Good to see you!”

Neville and Ginny entered the classroom and walked over to them. Neville shot an unnerved glance at Zalina. With her dark glasses and green tie, she cut an intimidating figure.

“Harry,” he greeted.

“Evening,” Ginny said, tossing her braid over her shoulder with an appraising look around the room.

“Neville, Ginny, this is Zalina. Zalina, Ginny and Neville.”

Zalina shook Ginny’s, then Neville’s hands with mock formality.

“It’s an honor to meet you,” she said, pressing a hand to her chest.

“Likewise,” Neville stuttered.

“You were a reserve on the Slytherin team, right?” Ginny asked immediately.

“Yeah, I was. Not anymore, though, I was never any good. I’ve seen you play though, you’re amazing!”

Ginny looked flattered.

“I’ve played quidditch with my brothers since I was a kid,” she said.

“You have a lot of older siblings, don’t you?” Zalina asked. “I have one. I’m the oldest, my little brother is coming to Hogwarts next year.”

“What house do you think he’ll be in? Slytherin like you?”

“Alas, no. He’s a Gryffindor through and through. Maybe Hufflepuff, though. Who knows? I thought I’d be a Ravenclaw myself.”

“I thought some of my brothers would be Slytherins,” Ginny admitted.

“Really? Who?” Harry asked, curious.

“Percy and the twins. They’re an ambitious lot.”

Harry looked around the room, and realized that everyone was waiting for him to begin. He cleared his throat and clapped his hands loudly.

“Hello, everyone!”

The room fell silent.

“If you don’t know me, I’m Harry Potter.”

“We know,” a Gryffindor girl called.

Chuckles sounded throughout the room. Harry shrugged, grinning.

“This is Zalina Mogilova, she’s a cofounder of this club,” he announced.

“Good afternoon,” Zalina said. “The first rule of the club is this: Anyone who can’t pronounce my last name on their first try is going to be kicked out immediately.”

“That was a joke,” Harry clarified, hoping that he was right.

“Yep. May I?” Zalina asked, gesturing to the crowd.

Harry nodded, stepping back.

“Okay, everyone who is here to help tutor others, come up to the front!” Zalina said.

Other than Neville, Ginny, Zalina, and the Patils, three Ravenclaws, one Slytherin, and a Hufflepuff walked up.

“Great. Everyone else, split yourselves up by the subject you need help with.”

The students shuffled into groups, Slytherins finally mingling with the rest of the houses.

The classroom was a bit small for all these people. Harry ran a hand through his hair, thinking.

“Which group is the history of magic group?”

The hands of the leftmost group shot up.

“Which of you can help them?” Harry asked the tutors.

The Hufflepuff girl raised her hand.

“Great. All of you, go to the library and study there. Or, maybe somewhere else. It doesn’t matter. What’s your name?” Harry asked the Hufflepuff girl.

“Pamela.”

“History group, Pamela is now in charge.”

Pamela led them out of the room.

“Now, people here for defense, please go over there.”

Harry pointed to the back of the classroom, where the dummies were. The majority of the room flooded in that direction.

“Will you split the others?” Harry asked Zalina.

She nodded.

“Great.”

Harry walked toward the defense group, hearing Zalina giving orders behind him. The kids looked up at him, awaiting instructions.

“Alright, everyone. Who needs help with what?” Harry asked.

Shuffling and looking in different directions ensued. Finally, a young Gryffindor raised her hand.

“I need help with my shield charm.”

“Does anybody else need help with that?”

Two other kids raised their hands.

“Great. Now, do any of you know how to perform a good shield charm?”

More hands went up.

“You.” Harry pointed to a Ravenclaw. “Demonstrate it, please.”

“*Protego*!”

“Try to repeat what he did.”

The girl waved her wand in a crooked motion.

“*Protego!*”

Her shield charm was skewed to the side.

“Try to keep your wand straighter.”

“*Protego!*”

This time, it was a bit better.

“Did you see what you did wrong?” Harry asked.

The girl nodded.

“Great. The three of you can practice your shield charms and try to get the wand movement right. I’ll come see how you’re doing in a few minutes.”

The three students went off to the side and began casting. Harry went through all the others like that. After the kids had split up into groups by what spell they needed help with, he began to wander among them and offer feedback. Almost everyone was focusing on their spellwork, and a working environment filled the room. It was noisy, of course, with all the spells being cast.

“*Protego!*”

“*Stupefy*!”

“*Wingardium Leviosa!”*

“Mind your own fucking business!”

Harry’s head snapped in the direction that the last comment had come

from. He saw Zalina and a sixth-year Gryffindor boy facing off. Both looked furious.

“Don’t swear around the children!” Zalina snapped.

“Who’s going to stop me?”

Harry crossed the room and leaped between them.

“*What* is going on here?” he asked.

“You need to tell this bitch to–”

“*Silencio!”* Zalina cast.

His mouth continued moving, but sound stopped coming out.

“If you can’t speak in a civilized way, you won’t speak at all. Three points from Gryffindor,” Zalina said.

The Gryffindor boy mouthed something very unflattering at Zalina. Harry wasn’t sure if he imagined the color of Zalina’s eyes reddening, before returning to dark brown.

“Let's talk outside,” Harry suggested, glancing at the eavesdropping students.

Zalina and the boy followed him outside.

“What happened?” Harry asked.

Zalina took a deep breath, before plastering on a fake smile.

“Ryan here was very loudly speaking and laughing with some other students. I walked over and asked what spell they were working on. Ryan did not wish to tell me. I said that in that case, I would have to assume that he was off task and being a disruption to the room, and take points. After that, Ryan decided to tell me what he thought of me and gave me a graphic description of where I could put the aforementioned points. I believe you heard the rest.”

Harry turned to Ryan.

“*Finite*.”

“You lying snake!” Ryan snapped at Zalina.

“What do *you* think happened, then?” Zalina spat. This time Harry was sure that her eyes turned redder.

“I was minding my own business, when she started bothering me for no reason!”

“I am a prefect and a cofounder of this club. You will respect me.”

Ryan drew in a breath to keep fighting, but Harry interrupted him.

“Here's what's going to happen. We're going to go back inside that room and calmly continue doing what we're doing. Ryan, if something like this happens again, I will remove you from the club.”

“You believe *her?*” Ryan demanded.

Zalina sneered at him.

“Yes. Go inside.”

Ryan glared at Zalina one last time, before walking into the classroom.

Zalina muttered something in another language. From her tone, Harry gathered that she was swearing.

“Sorry,” Harry said. “Nothing like that was supposed to happen.”

Zalina waved a hand.

“It’s definitely not *your* fault. You could say we have a history. He *hates* me,” she said with a dark smile. “Don’t worry, it’s mutual.”

“Why?” Harry asked.

“Other than because he's a fool and a son of a bitch?” Zalina asked wryly.

“Yes.”

Zalina sighed.

“We were in third year when Umbridge came here. At the beginning of the year, she liked me. She had a soft spot for Slytherins, and I'm generally a good student. I despised her, but I wasn't dumb enough to tell her that to her face. No offense,” she added.

“None taken,” Harry responded. He had never technically told

Umbridge that he hated her.

“Anyway, I don't know what he did to her, but she really disliked Ryan. At one point, she took house points away from him for sharpening his quill, which I had done earlier with no consequences. He was furious at her, and at me. The next day, he let slip to Umbridge that I have vampire heritage.”

Harry winced.

“After that, she loathed me. Third year also happened to be the year when we studied vampires. In earlier years, we learned about vampires too, but in a neutral way. I loved that unit, and I helped everyone with homework. With Umbridge, it was different. She taught us that vampires are monsters and all about how to kill them. She droned on and on about it, every fucking day. She looked right at me the whole time. She assigned us twenty-four inches of parchment about it, and said she’d give extra credit to anyone who mentioned half-breeds and the ways in which they infect wizarding society. Then, she gave me detention over *nothing*, and forced me to read and mark all of them. Xenophobic bitch,” Zalina spat venomously. Her eyes darkened and took on a distinctly reddish hue.

Harry digested this information, horrified. He imagined third-year Zalina sitting in Umbridge’s hideous pink office and reading essays that her own classmates had written about how to kill her and her family.

“That was the only detention I’ve ever gotten,” Zalina added with grim pride, before frowning again.

“I can’t blame Ryan much for telling her. It’s not like I kept it a secret. I’m proud to be part vampire. Umbridge would have probably found out one way or another. What I am mad at him for is being one of the only ones who actually wrote the extra credit part. He went into great detail, too.”

Harry felt the sudden and very violent urge to find Ryan and punch him in the face.

“Even before third year, Ryan never liked me. Since our very first year, he called me names and randomly threw garlic at me. Once, he snuck a dead bat into my bag. I insulted him back, of course. He really started hating me at the end of our first year, when we found out that Professor Lupin was a werewolf. Ryan said horrible things about him, so I snuck him a puking pastille during breakfast.”

“Good!”

“So yeah. I’m his number one enemy.”

“Why don’t you just kick him from the club?” Harry asked.

“Oh, if he undermines my authority again, I’m going to,” Zalina said with a fanged grin. “The only thing that’s been saving him is that he hasn’t bothered any other Slytherins. I’m the special one, I suppose.”

“Why not kick him out now?”

Zalina shrugged.

“Eh. Let’s see him try to be nice. It’s funnier that way.”

Chapter 23: Chapter 23

“This can't keep happening,” Draco said.

Harry lifted his head from the armrest of the couch. The fire illuminated half of his face with an orange glow, throwing the rest into shadow.

“Why not?” he asked with a frown.

“Last time, we almost fell asleep. Anyone could walk down here at any moment,” Draco said.

“So?”

Draco looked down at the blanket that covered both their legs, formulating his thoughts.

“People could think things,” he said eloquently.

“Like what? We’re friends, it’s not some big secret.”

Did he truly not realize? Not even consider?

“Doesn't it bother you at all that anyone could see us and we wouldn't even know?” Draco asked.

The thought alone filled him with dread. It wasn't just that he didn't want to be seen sleeping on a couch next to Potter of all people. He didn't want *Harry* to be seen with *him.* Harry had enough to worry about without being accused of fraternizing with death eaters.

“Alright, you have a point,” Harry conceded.

He ran a hand through his hair and looked deep in thought.

“I have an idea!” he exclaimed.

Harry leaped to his feet and disappeared up the stairs, leaving Draco sitting on the couch by himself. He returned less than a minute later, carrying something.

“Let’s go for a walk,” he said.

“A walk?” Draco asked. “Professor Potter, are you corrupting students

into breaking the rules?"

Harry rolled his eyes.

"I'm not a professor yet. Let's go."

"We are going to get caught."

"No, we're not!"

Harry brandished the thing he'd brought from his room.

"The invisibility cloak?"

Harry threw the fabric over himself, and disappeared.

"Yes," came Harry's disembodied voice.

He pulled on the fabric, exposing his head which hovered in midair. Draco shuddered at the strange sight. Then, he remembered something.

"The Shrieking Shack in third year! That was *you* in this bloody cloak!"

Harry laughed, pulling the cloak off completely.

"Hogwarts is ours for the night," he announced.

Draco was still not over the revelation that it *had* been Potter who threw mud at him in third year while wearing the cloak, but he set that particular bit of thinking aside for later.

"Two of us should fit."

Harry walked over to Draco and threw the cloak over both of them. In order to fit, they had to stand very close together. Harry hooked his arm around Draco's, presumably so they didn't accidentally drift apart. Draco forced himself not to stiffen or pull away instinctively. Harry's arm was warm and solid under his ridiculous pyjamas.

Together, they awkwardly climbed out of the portrait hole. The owl was asleep.

"Where are we going?" Draco whispered, fighting the urge to press closer to Harry as the chill of the night seeped in.

“Somewhere with fresh air,” Harry whispered back.

Through the fabric of the cloak, the corridor looked slightly blurry and tinged white. Draco wondered if that was how ghosts saw the world. He and Harry had turned into something like ghosts themselves, gliding through Hogwarts unseen.

They climbed the stairs to the astronomy tower, arm in arm. The night was fresh and cold, not a single cloud to be seen. The sky was alight with stars, and the crescent moon hung above the castle.

Dumbledore, falling off the tower.

Harry pulled the cloak off of them. He spread it out on the floor and lay down. Draco joined him.

“You’re thinking about it too, aren’t you?” Harry asked quietly.

Draco nodded stonily.

“It wasn’t your fault, you know.”

Rage, sudden and blinding, flared within Draco.

“Are you *daft*, Potter?”

“I’m serious.”

“I let them in. It was *me.*”

“He made you!”

“Will you stop it with that?!” Draco snarled, sitting up sharply. “That’s all you can ever say, he made me *this,* he made me *that.* Yes, he did! But I was the one that did it, wasn’t I? It *is my fault.*”

“Do you *want* to hate yourself?!” Harry snapped. “You are a *hypocrite,* Draco Malfoy! You tell me that the deaths aren’t my fault, but you just refuse to believe, even for a second, that *you* might be innocent, too!”

Draco gaped at him, stunned and enraged by the onslaught. Luna’s words echoed in his head. *I don’t want to be sad. Do you?*

“Why do you do this to yourself?!” Harry demanded. “What’s it going to fix? Nothing!”

“How can you even *compare*–” Draco’s breath caught in indignation.

“What’s the difference? Enlighten me!”

What’s the DIFFERENCE?!

“You know what, Potter?” Draco snapped, temper getting the better of him. “If Severus hadn’t shown up here that night, I WOULD HAVE DONE IT. I would have killed him! He wanted to help me, and I– *I*…”

Draco buried his face in his hands, breaking off. A bitter wave of guilt and grief knocked the air from his lungs. Pure loathing stirred within him. He was a weakling, a fool, and a coward. He *hated* it with all the passion in his soul. He hated, hated, *HATED*–

A set of arms wrapped around him. A muffled sob escaped him as Harry hugged him. Nobody had done that since… Well, since after his trial, when he and his mother were safely at home. She’d cried and cried…

“You wouldn’t have done it,” Harry said firmly, arms tightening. “I was there, Draco, I saw.”

The confidence, the conviction in his voice, smashed through every bit of self-control Draco had left. The tears came in a flood, sobs fighting each other to escape and leaving no space to breathe. He clung to Harry, his lifeline in the storm, as the waves battered him.

Finally, there were no tears left. Only the quiet that came after. Draco understood that later, he would be mortified by this entire ordeal, but he was too exhausted to care.

Harry was the one that broke the silence.

“Where’s your constellation?” Harry asked, looking up at the black sky.

“Over there,” Draco pointed dully.

“I don’t see it.”

“That’s not surprising. Your vision is atrocious,” Draco mumbled.

Harry snorted.

“Look. Those stars, see?” Draco pointed again.

“Yeah, I see it. It looks just like you!”

That actually startled a sort of laugh out of Draco.

“What other constellations do you see?” Harry asked, leaning back on his elbows. Stars sparkled reflected in his glasses. Draco forced himself to tear his eyes away.

“See that ‘w’ shape? That's Cassiopeia. Then there's Orion, and the Sirius star.”

The silence took on a melancholy tinge.

“What was he like?” Draco asked quietly.

“Sirius?”

“Yes.”

Draco listened as Harry told him all about Sirius Black. He listened, ignoring the trembling, husky quality Harry’s voice took on and the silver tracks running down his face. Sirius was Draco's blood. Draco knew about him, but he'd never met the man. Harry had, though, and by the time he finished talking, Draco felt like he knew Sirius too.

“I think he'd like you,” Harry said, discreetly wiping his eyes and clearing his throat.

Draco snorted humorlessly.

“No, really!”

“I suppose you'd know better,” Draco shrugged, teeth chattering slightly.

“You're cold! Bloody hell, sorry!”

Harry sat up.

“I’m fine,” Draco snapped, sitting up as well.

“We should head back inside, anyway,” Harry said, clearing his throat again.

Draco nodded. Harry stood and extended a hand to help Draco up.

“How chivalrous,” Draco mocked halfheartedly. He accepted Harry’s hand and rose to his feet.

“Only the best for the Prince of Slytherin,” Harry said, picking up the cloak.

“Lowly peasant,” Draco sneered, eliciting a chuckle.

Hidden under the cloak, the two of them made their somber, silent way back down the stairs.

They were only a few corridors away from the common room, when they heard footsteps.

They looked at each other, equally panicked. Adrenaline swept away the dreary mood in a flash.

Harry grabbed Draco by the waist and yanked him backward. Draco bit back a hissed curse as his elbow banged into the wall.

Sorry, Harry mouthed.

Draco stamped on his foot, hard. Harry lightly elbowed his side. Draco wanted to retaliate, but the footsteps grew louder until Professor McGonagall strode into view.

Draco froze, trying to breathe as quietly as possible. Next to him, Harry was doing the same. McGonagall glanced around as she walked, on the lookout for rule-breakers. She seemed to look directly at Draco and Harry. *We're under the cloak, she can't see us,* Draco reminded himself.

McGonagall finally looked away from them and moved on. Her measured footsteps grew quieter and quieter.

Now that the imminent threat had passed, Draco's senses began to take in his immediate surroundings. Harry's arm was still wrapped around his waist, and Draco's arm ended up around Harry's shoulders. Their sides were pressed together. Despite the time spent out in the fresh air, Harry was positively radiating warmth.

Though McGonagall had left, Draco did not want to move. He wanted to stay like this, with Harry, and…

Draco slammed that train of thought to a halt. What was he *thinking?*

He quickly withdrew his arm, hoping Harry wouldn’t see the blush spreading across his face. Harry slowly released Draco’s waist and took his arm instead. They continued down the corridor in silence.

Harry pulled the cloak off of them when they were safely in the common room. He stretched and yawned.

“I think I’m ready to sleep now,” he said.

Draco nodded, though he was absolutely not ready to sleep. Adrenaline still flowed through his veins, along with the jumbled emotions left over from the Tower. He dreaded being left alone with it all, and could already sense the nightmares stalking through his subconscious, waiting for him to fall asleep to strike.

He climbed the stairs, Harry following close behind. He paused with his hand on his doorknob and turned to Harry. He wanted to say goodnight, but the words stuck in his throat as he heard someone else’s door begin opening.

Harry heard it too. He grabbed Draco’s wrist and pulled the both of them into Draco’s room. Draco shoved the door closed behind them and froze, listening. A set of footsteps passed the door without slowing down.

Draco exhaled. He turned and saw that Harry was looking around his room. There wasn’t much to see. Stacks of books on the table, a green carpet, green sheets, gray stone walls.

Harry started to laugh. Draco joined in as the adrenaline went to his head. Harry laughed harder and harder, hand pressed over his mouth to muffle the sound. Finally, he collapsed on the bed, clutching his stomach.

Draco forced himself to calm down first, though his nerves still jangled and shrill, crazy giggles threatened to rise to the surface.

“Sorry,” Harry gasped, wiping away tears of mirth.

“For what?”

“For coming into your room like that.”

Draco shrugged. Harry stood and walked over to Draco's desk.

“Can I…”

His fingers hovered in the air, by Draco's books.

“Yes.”

Harry read title after title.

“Is this in French?” he asked, lifting a book with a sky blue cover.

“Yes.”

“What is it about?”

“It's a book of classic French wizarding fairytales.”

“I wish I could read it.”

“I could read them to you, if you'd like.”

Idiot! Even if he wanted Harry to stay in his room for a bit longer, he could stop acting so desperate!

“In French?” Harry asked.

“Of course not, I'd translate.”

“Alright. I won't be able to sleep for a bit, anyway. I need something to relax.”

Draco smirked. If Harry wanted something to *relax,* this was the wrong book. There was too much gore in it for that.

Harry handed Draco the book, and lay down on the bed.

Draco raised an eyebrow at him.

“What? I want to see the illustrations!”

Draco sighed and joined him, on his stomach with the book in front of him. How undignified. He opened the book to the first page and began.

“Once upon a time, there was a little girl.”

Draco read slowly, translating the sentences one by one. Harry listened, sometimes commenting but mostly keeping quiet. Draco hoped that Harry hadn't noticed him trip over a sentence when their legs accidentally brushed.

Draco finished the first fairytale.

Harry hummed contentedly. He looked half asleep.

“Go to your room,” Draco forced himself to say. If Harry was seen exiting his room in the morning, that could lead to a whole new set of problems. “You're sleeping.”

Harry mumbled unhappily, but sat up. His glasses were crooked. Draco felt a strange impulse to fix them. He restrained himself.

Harry stood up and stretched.

“Night, Draco.”

“Night, Harry.”

Harry smiled and walked out of the room. Draco climbed under his covers. The bed was warm where Harry had been. Draco curled up in that spot and fell asleep.

Chapter 24: Chapter 24

Draco awoke the next morning with a pounding headache. He'd slept surprisingly well for the first half of the night, but after…

Draco slammed both palms against his forehead, groaning aloud as the events of the evening surfaced in his mind. He was so, so, *so*… Stupid. Screwed. He'd ruined *everything.*

Oh, Saint Potter, would you like me to read you a book? Would you like me to lick your shoes while I'm at it? It seems that that's the kind of think I'm APPARENTLY LIKELY TO DO.

Would you do me the honor of letting me cry on your shoulder? What a lost soul am I, practically begging for pity.

This was it. He was completely, utterly fucked. Now Potter had seen exactly how pathetic he was. He'd either feel pity or disgust, and *neither* was something that Draco was willing to tolerate.

Be rational, Draco told himself. *It's fine. It's fine.* Fine. *Who cares? He probably forgot already. It's not a big deal, why am I making a tragedy out of this, anyway?*

It's not like he hasn't seen you cry before, a mean voice whispered in his head.

Draco let out a strangled growl, leaping to his feet. He stalked a circle across his room, rage at himself simmering within.

He deserved this, didn't he? For being such a sentimental, pathetic, incurable fool.

Will you CALM DOWN? Draco snapped at himself. *Stop it. Stop it right now. You are being utterly ridiculous, now pull yourself together and go to class.*

The last thing he wanted to do was see Harry, but he would *not* be skipping class just to avoid him. He had not yet fallen *that* low. With steely fury, he got dressed and stalked out of the common room. At the sight of his face, younger students scattered.

He took his seat and laced his fingers, spine rigid. The knot of tension inside him writhed, aching for some kind of release. Draco caught himself bouncing his knee and brought it to a sharp stop.

What was *wrong* with him? Why did he care so much, anyway? This was *Potter*.

Exactly.

Draco ran a hand through his hair, biting down another groan. Maybe he could just obliviate Potter and be done with it. Or himself. That prospect grew more tempting with each passing second.

After long minutes of tensing each time the door opened to let in a student, Harry finally entered the room.

And… he acted no different. Not that class nor the next, nor the next. Draco was torn between immense relief and an odd sort of disappointment. The emotions within him were left to slowly wilt away, lacking an outlet. Yet wilt they did, and everything shifted back to relative normalcy. Thank Merlin for that.

Harry dragged Draco outside again after their next potion meeting.

“Here, I brought my firebolt,” he said.

Draco accepted it.

“You don't have to do this, you know.”

“I'm just letting you use my broom. What are you going to do, crash it?”

Draco smirked.

“Maybe I should.”

Harry frowned. Draco leaped onto the broom and took off, soaring into the vast, blue expanse. The world faded away, leaving Draco alone with the sky and the wind. No, he *was* the wind.

Draco did a complicated loop in the air, thrill running through him as up and down blurred together. The firebolt wasn't the best broom for nothing. It obeyed his every command seamlessly. Merlin, he’d missed this.

Finally, Draco flew back down to the ground. He dismounted from the broom and handed it to Harry.

“Oh, so you're the one who flies on it, but I have to carry it?” Harry

asked.

“You don't have to carry it, you can fly too. Besides, what if I crash it?” Draco smirked.

Harry mounted the broom and soared up into the clouds. Draco watched him fly. The occasional whoop reached his ears. The clouds grew thicker and thicker. Thunder crashed in the distance. Draco cupped his hands over his mouth to amplify his voice.

“Harry, I think it's going to–”

The sky cracked open and a wall of water spilled forth. Within a second, Draco was soaked to the bone.

“...rain,” he muttered.

He squinted up, looking for Harry. Flying in a storm was dangerous, they had to go back to the castle. A dark spec got larger and larger as Harry flew over to Draco. He shouted something.

“What?” Draco called over the storm.

“Get on!”

Harry stopped the broom next to Draco.

“Come on, quickly!”

Draco hesitated, but the cold won out. He clambered onto the firebolt behind Harry and wrapped his arms around Harry's waist. Even in the rain, the git still managed to be warm.

“Go!” Draco shouted.

The broom took off, soaring toward the castle. Rain stung Draco's face and dripped down his collar. He wished he'd thought to cast a water repelling charm on himself before getting on the broom.

Between the rain and the speed, Draco barely had time to consider the last time he and Harry had shared a broom. Instead of heat and flames, this time was freezing and wet.

The broom soared higher and higher.

“Where are you going?” Draco shrieked.

“Ast… wer!”

The rest of Harry's words were snatched away by the wind, but it was enough. The Astronomy Tower. It was open, there was room to fly inside right on the broom.

Lightning crackled through the sky, right near them. Draco’s arms tightened around Harry’s waist and he buried his face in Harry's neck. He didn't even care what Harry would think. Harry's shoulder was warm and wind-free.

The broom shot under the roof of the astronomy tower and down the spiral staircase. It screeched to a halt so abrupt that Draco almost went flying off the broom and into a wall. The two of them tumbled onto the floor.

Draco sat up. His heart still felt like it was trying to break out of his chest. He inhaled breath after breath.

Harry's hair was dripping and plastered to his skull. It looked nothing like its usual nest. His clothes were sopping wet and askew, and his glasses were covered in water. It was a wonder he'd managed to get them to the tower at all. Draco knew he didn't look much better.

Harry started to laugh. Quietly at first, but it grew louder and louder. Harry flopped onto his back, continuing to laugh. Draco tried to resist, but it was impossible. He began laughing as well. He laughed until his stomach hurt and tears of mirth mixed with the raindrops on his face.

“You look– You look like a wet cat,” Harry choked.

Draco bent double as a new wave of laughter hit. Finally, he managed to stop.

“Try your patronus!” Harry said eagerly.

Draco pulled out his wand. Doubts began to surface in his mind, but the way Harry was looking at him…

“*Expecto patronum*!”

A cloud of light billowed out of his wand. It began to solidify, before dissipating.

“You almost did it that time!” Harry exclaimed.

“I think I saw… Hooves?” Draco said uncertainly.

“It was definitely something big. Not a ferret, then.”

“Shut up.”

“What do you think it is?”

“I thought it might be a peacock, or a dragon. Now, I don't know.”

Draco shivered. His wet robes clung to his skin.

“Let's go to the common room. We need to change into something dry,” Harry said.

Draco nodded and climbed to his feet. His legs felt stiff and unwieldy. They stumbled down the corridors toward the common room. The few people they encountered gave them sideways looks but kept quiet upon seeing Harry. They stopped at Draco's door.

“Bye then,” Harry said, running a hand through his wet hair. It formed spikes. Draco smirked.

“What?”

“Find a mirror.”

Harry flattened his hair back.

“There, now I look like you,” he chuckled.

“Don't be ridiculous. You could never look nearly as good as me.”

A mischievous spark appeared in Harry's eyes. He reached out and ruffled Draco's hair.

“What in the name of *Merlin* do you think you're doing, Potter?!”

Draco slapped Harry's hands away. Harry's shoulders shook with laughter.

“You look hilarious!”

Draco quickly smoothed his hair down.

“I hate you,” he scowled.

He would never admit it, but something in his chest warmed at the interaction.

“Bye, Draco,” Harry said.

He walked away down the hallway, still chuckling to himself.

Chapter 25: Chapter 25

The next day, Draco woke up with a sore throat and a runny nose. He didn't want to get out of bed, but he forced himself to rise.

"*Accio* handkerchief," he mumbled.

A handkerchief wiggled out of his trunk and floated over to him. He tried to snatch it out of the air but missed. Draco muttered a curse, picking it up from the bedspread. He blew his nose loudly.

"*Scourgify,"* he mumbled thickly.

The handkerchief turned clean again. By the time Draco changed and stumbled out of his room, his nose was red and swollen. He stalked out of the common room and toward the hospital wing, ignoring the people sitting inside.

Upon seeing him, Madam Pomfrey clasped her hands on her chest.

"My goodness. Did you get caught out in the rain yesterday?"

Draco nodded. Madam Pomfrey tutted about careless students and paying more attention to the weather as she flitted around her potions cupboard. She shoved a few pepper-ups into Draco's hands, along with something to help with the congestion.

"I'll tell the house-elves to bring you soup and tea," Madam Pomfrey promised.

Draco muttered his thanks and left.

Colds were the absolute worst because there was no magical cure for them. Thankfully, it was Saturday. No classes to worry about.

Draco saw Blaise sauntering down the hallway toward him.

"My goodness, Draco. You look absolutely terrible."

"Thank you, Blaise. A master of compliments, as always."

He sneezed into his handkerchief.

"Bloody Potter," he muttered darkly.

“Potter?”

“Who else would have the idea to go flying in the rain?”

“Ah. That was quite the storm yesterday. So your sorry state is Potter's fault?”

“Yes,” Draco snapped.

Blaise nodded.

“I'm going to my room to die in peace,” Draco said.

“Enjoy.”

“I won't.”

Draco climbed through the portrait hole, up the stairs, and into his room. He shut the door behind him, pulled off his outer robes, and collapsed on his bed. He chugged half a vial of pepper-up, *accio*-ed a book, and settled down onto his sickbed.

About an hour later, someone knocked on his door.

“What?” Draco snapped. He shuddered at the rasp of his own voice.

“Can I come in?”

Contrary to his expectations, the voice of the visitor belonged to Harry, not Blaise.

“The fuck are you doing here?” Draco groaned.

“I brought you something!”

“Whatever. Come in.”

The door did not open.

“My hands are full,” Harry called guiltily.

Draco swore at him. In order to reach his wand, he'd have to move. He did not want to move.

Draco grabbed his wand and spelled the door open. Harry edged inside. He had a huge tray in his hands.

“You know you can just do this. *Wingardium Leviosa.*”

The tray floated out of Harry's hands.

“Now, your hands are free. Incredible.”

Harry ran a hand through his hair guiltily.

“Sorry.”

Draco floated the tray over to his bedside table. It barely fit. Once it was no longer in danger of falling, he collapsed back into his blanket nest.

Harry’s voice carried from the outside world.

“I brought you soup, tea, and some biscuits.”

As a response, Draco sneezed. He wiped his nose on the handkerchief miserably, then cleaned it with a wandless scourgify. He had mastered that particular bit of magic last time he’d been sick.

“How did you know I’m ill?” Draco asked hoarsely.

“Zabini told me. He strongly implied that I was to blame and if I didn't do something to remedy the situation, there would be consequences.”

Draco recognized Blaise's manner of speaking in Harry's words.

“I am going to kill Blaise,” he mumbled into his pillow.

“Take the tea,” Harry urged.

“I can't.”

“Why not?”

“I'm asleep.”

Harry snorted. Draco hid a smile in his pillow. He took a second to marvel at himself. The illness must have addled his brain.

“Drink the bloody tea,” Harry said.

Draco emerged from his blanket nest again. He sat up against the headboard and accepted the tea. He took a sip and spat it out immediately.

“*Ah*! That is *scalding!*”

“Blow on it or something.”

“Cooling charms exist, you know,” Draco drawled.

“Cast one of those, then.”

“You do it.”

Harry threw his hands up.

“Why me?”

“If you're forcing your presence on me, you might as well make yourself useful.”

Harry muttered something unflattering in Draco's general direction and took out his wand. He cast a cooling charm on the tea.

Draco took a sip.

“Too cold.”

Harry's annoyed face brought him satisfaction. He hid a smirk in the tea.

Harry saw it anyway.

“Prick,” he muttered.

Draco's smirk widened.

After a few more heating and cooling charms from Harry, Draco declared the tea satisfactory.

They lapsed into silence as Harry watched Draco sip the tea.

“What book is that?” Harry asked, gesturing to the discarded book.

“The story of Merlin. When I got sick as a child, my mother would read it to me.”

“I've never read it. I don't really know much about Merlin,” Harry admitted.

“*What*?” Draco exclaimed, loudly enough to hurt his sore throat. He lapsed into a coughing fit, almost spilling the tea.

“Do you not pay any attention at all in our history of magic class?”

Draco demanded hoarsely once the fit passed.

Harry shrugged.

“We didn't really learn much about him. Binns just sort of assumed we all knew. He assigned a chapter of a book for those who didn't. I didn't read the chapter, I was busy.”

Draco all but threw the book at Harry.

“Read this. Right now.”

“Alright, alright!” Harry said, raising his hands. He looked amused.

He opened the book and began reading out loud. Draco was pleasantly surprised. He hadn't expected Harry to do that. He burrowed into his blanket nest, taking his tea with him, and closed his eyes. Harry was a decent reader. A few chapters in, he forced Draco to eat the soup. His voice and the familiar story lulled Draco to sleep.

When Draco woke up, he saw that Harry was still there, sleeping in the chair by his bedside. The book lay open to little past halfway. His glasses were crooked on his nose. Draco most certainly did *not* experience any inexplicably positive emotions upon seeing him, nor did he think that anything he was seeing at the moment was adorable. The horrid taste in his mouth was preventing him from noticing much else. The worst part of having a cold was being unable to breathe through the nose.

Draco freshened his breath with a charm and took a sip of the now-cold tea. His movements awakened Harry. He sat up and rubbed his eyes with a groan.

“Good morning,” Draco said.

“Is it morning?” Harry asked in alarm.

“No.”

Twilight had only just fallen, from what little of the sun Draco could see through the window.

“Git,” Harry muttered.

“Go eat dinner,” Draco said, making a shooing motion at him.

“Yeah. Ron and Hermione are probably looking for me.”

Draco graciously refrained from making a face at the mention of Granger and Weasley.

“Bon appetit.”

“Bye.”

Harry left. Draco pulled the book over to him and began looking for the spot where he fell asleep. He summoned a bookmark and placed it into the book where Harry had stopped, then continued to read.

He drifted asleep again at around midnight, and slept until eleven. His dreams were vivid and mildly unnerving, but not nightmares. One of them featured Merlin and Harry dueling, because Harry was claiming that Merlin hadn't truly existed at all.

Upon awakening, Draco felt slightly better, but he still didn't plan to leave his room. He got up, brushed his teeth, and grabbed a new book. He had finished the other one the day before.

“Draco!”

The door burst open and Pansy appeared. Draco was sure he'd locked his door, but he hadn't reinforced it with a spell.

“Good morning, Pansy,” he muttered. Pansy's voice had brought back his headache.

“Darling, you look awful.”

Draco didn't bother holding back his sigh.

Pansy threw something at him. Draco caught it reflexively. It was a slab of chocolate.

“This is for you. Get better,” she commanded.

“Thank you,” Draco said.

He genuinely meant it. He hadn't exactly been a good friend that year, yet she still brought him sweets and came to visit when he was sick.

“Whatever,” Pansy said, waving her hand. She pranced across the room and sat down in the chair that Harry had occupied the day before.

Draco unwrapped the chocolate and took a bite. It was delicious.

“Do you have a fever?” Pansy asked, reaching to feel his forehead without awaiting an answer.

Draco's door burst open.

“Good morning! I brought–”

Harry stopped short, looking from Pansy to Draco to the chocolate. He was levitating a tray of food from breakfast, complete with a new mug of tea. His smile faded.

“–breakfast.”

Harry levitated the tray to the table, almost spilling everything.

“Sorry if I interrupted,” he said, backing out the door.

Draco lifted his hand, but the door had already closed. He slumped back down, mood ruined.

“Potter, hm?” Pansy asked, looking from Draco to the door with a finger pressed to her chin.

“Potter *what?*” Draco asked frostily.

The door opened again and Blaise sauntered in.

“Has someone made this the common room while I was asleep?” Draco snapped.

“Good morning to you too,” Blaise responded. “I wanted to see whether you kept your promise from yesterday.”

“Yes, I did. I actually died. You are currently speaking with my vengeful spirit.”

Blaise nodded sagely.

“Good to know. Pansy, I think we'd better come back when his spirit becomes a little less vengeful.”

“Good idea.”

Pansy stood.

“Heal up, darling,” she tossed, before they both left the room.

They came back with lunch. Draco spoke with them, or rather, listened to them speak, for a few hours. The conversation was actually pleasant.

Harry didn't come back that day.

Chapter 26: Chapter 26

Thankfully, the next day, Draco felt perfectly healthy. The day went by quickly, and Draco decided to skip dinner in favor of the library. He'd been meaning to check out a book on the advanced techniques of brewing sleeping potions.

Book in hand, he strode up to the eighth-year common room. He normally read in his own room, but there was nobody around and the armchairs were far more comfortable. Draco settled down in a corner and opened the book.

Exactly two minutes later, Draco was rudely interrupted. Pansy plopped down across from him slinging one leg over the other. Thick, black eyeliner reached up to her temples, through the bright green of her eyeshadow.

“Good evening, Draco darling.”

“Good evening,” Draco responded, not looking up from the book.

Pansy did not get the message. This was what he got for staying in the common room. Although, if Pansy really got it in her head to talk to him, his door wouldn't stop her either. Nor would a moat of acid.

“Good to see you're feeling better. You sounded awful yesterday, it was like talking to a poorly reanimated corpse.”

“Yes, well, we all have our bad days.”

Draco finally looked up at the girl. By the mischief in her smile it was clear that she had something more to say than idle chatter.

“Is there something you want to tell me?” Draco asked.

“Rude,” Pansy pouted. “Can't a girl just talk to her friend?”

Draco arched a brow, waiting.

“Alright,” Pansy sighed, giving up. “I don't know if even the most basic information reaches you under the rock that you've placed upon yourself, but the eighth-years are going to Hogsmeade tomorrow.”

“Enjoy.”

“Draco, literally every single one of us is going except you.”

“Fascinating.”

“*Draco*.”

Pansy leaned forward, long nails digging into the arms of her chair.

“Are you ever planning on reentering society? Or are you going to rot away in solitude for the rest of your life?” she hissed.

Draco was taken aback at the onslaught.

“Come on! Where's the Draco I know? The Draco that loves being the center of attention?”

“He's dead, Pansy,” Draco snapped.

“Then you'd better resurrect him because you're going to Hogsmeade with us.”

“Does anyone else know that you're inviting me? Has it occurred to you that they may not want me there?” Draco hissed.

Pansy grinned slyly.

“Actually, it was Potter that asked me to invite you.”

“*What?!*”

“Mhm. He was so shy around me, the poor bloke. He seemed to think that you'd be more likely to agree if *I* was the one that asked you,” she snickered.

Draco buried his face in his hands with a groan.

“So, Draco dear, I think the real question here is if there's anything *you* want to tell *me*.”

“No.”

“Draco, when Potter asks me to invite you to Hogsmeade, I get curious," Pansy said, lips stretching into a slow smirk. "I've seen you talking, I know you're working on something together, but are you friends? Or–”

“Yes, we're friends,” Draco interrupted, perhaps a tad too quickly.

“*Friends*, are you?” Pansy drawled.

“Don't you start with this again,” Draco warned.

“With what?” Pansy asked, batting her lashes. “*I'm* not the one who's been obsessed with Potter since first year.”

“*I'm not*–”

Draco took a deep breath.

“I am not obsessed,” he said more calmly.

“Mhm.”

“Pansy!” Draco snapped. “Stop it! Even if that was true, which it’s *not*, there's no point in torturing myself talking about it because *nothing is going to happen.”*

“I wouldn't be–”

“No!” Draco slammed his book shut with a snap. “Don't you do this! We have a good thing going right now, and I'm not going to ruin it! I am not talking about this and not thinking about this. This conversation is *over*.”

Pansy raised her hands in surrender.

“Fine.”

“And I'm not going to Hogsmeade.”

“Good. Maybe next time he'll work up the nerve and ask you himself. And when he does, I hope you agree. It would be good for you, it really would.”

Pansy stood and placed a hand on Draco's shoulder, before sauntering away.

Chapter 27: Chapter 27

Draco avoided Harry throughout the next morning. When the eighth-years disappeared to Hogsmeade, he took advantage of the empty common room to write two essays, one for potions and one for charms.

The day after, Draco didn't see Harry at all until evening, at which point they met in the brewing room. Draco was very satisfied with the results he'd gotten. He'd determined the middle point of viscosity that the potion mirrored over to the nearest hundredth.

Draco extinguished the flame under the cauldron and closed his notebook. When he looked up, he saw Harry shifting from one foot to the other by the door. He ran a hand through his hair in that way he did when he was nervous.

"What is it?" Draco asked.

Harry gave a start.

"You know how I've been tutoring the younger kids?" he asked.

"Saint Potter, always extending a helping hand to those in need," Draco mocked wryly.

Harry rolled his eyes. Draco smirked.

"I've been teaching them defense, but some of them have been asking about potions."

Draco kept an impassive face, waiting for Harry to continue. Harry sighed.

"Are you really going to make me say it?"

"Yes."

Harry sighed again, louder this time.

"I am absolutely horrible at potions and don't remember anything from first year."

Draco motioned for him to continue. Harry looked exasperated.

“Draco Malfoy, you are the best potioneer in this bloody school and you know it, so I don't know why you're making *me* say it.”

Draco smiled smugly.

“Would you help me teach the kids potions?” Harry asked.

Draco hesitated. Since the war, he'd tried to avoid crowds and attention. Harry's offer entailed both.

Harry's eyes widened pleadingly. Draco already knew what he would say, and that greatly annoyed him.

“There’s nobody better than you at potions!” Harry wheedled.

“Flattery?”

“Is it working?” Harry asked.

Draco let out a noise of disgust. Harry grinned.

“Is that a yes?”

“When is this little group of yours meeting?”

Harry ran a hand through his hair, looking guilty.

“In ten minutes…”

“*Potter!”*

Harry grinned sheepishly.

Ten minutes and about a million complaints later, Harry and Draco were standing inside the classroom that Harry was using for tutoring. Draco fought the urge to back into a corner. His shoulders began to curve in.

Malfoys don't slouch!

Draco straightened just as the first few students entered the room. They gave Draco sideways glances, but didn't comment. A few approached the improvised targets and began casting spells at them.

“Hey, Draco!” Zalina greeted, stopping beside him. “It’s been a while.”

“I suppose it has,” Draco said with a stiff nod.

“Are you here for potions?”

He nodded. Zalina grimaced. Though she was great at potions, it was one of her least favorite classes.

“Well, thanks for coming by! Just like the good old days, right?”

“Good old days indeed,” Draco murmured.

Zalina strolled away, toward the target area. Draco’s eyes wandered the room. To his surprise, the Slytherins weren’t that separate from the other houses. They were mingling and talking, exchanging jokes as they shot spells at the targets. Maybe this wouldn’t be so bad.

“What is *he* doing here?”

Draco stiffened, turning toward the door. A Gryffindor boy, sixth or seventh year, glared at Draco with an ugly look on his face. Draco raised his occlumency shields, keeping his face clear of emotion.

“He is here because I invited him to help you with potions,” Harry said.

Draco hadn't known that Harry's voice could be that cold.

“But he's a fucking death eater!”

“Fifteen points from Gryffindor,” Harry snarled.

The Gryffindor boy's face turned the same color as his tie.

“Why are you defending him?” the boy demanded.

“He is my friend and unlike you, he was invited. If you have a problem with that, you can leave.”

“Did he imperius you? Why would you invite him here, he shouldn't be at Hogwarts in the first place! He–”

Harry grabbed his wand, but he was too late. The boy was blasted all the way across the room. He hit the wall with a crack and collapsed to the floor, unconscious.

Everyone stared in the direction of the dummies, where the spell had come from.

“Oops. I missed,” Zalina shrugged, twirling a strand of hair.

“Five points to Slytherin, for admitting your mistake,” Harry said.

“Thank you,” Zalina said, inclining her head.

“Who wants to take Ryan to the hospital wing?” Harry asked.

“I'll do it,” Zalina volunteered.

“He needs to arrive in one piece,” Harry warned.

“Can I at least drink a bit of his blood?”

“*No*.”

“That's so *boring*,” Zalina sighed, levitating Ryan's unconscious body.

His head banged into the doorway on the way out.

“Oops,” Zalina said, not looking regretful in the least.

The two of them disappeared down the hallway.

“Are you alright?” Harry asked Draco in an undertone.

“Yes, Potter,” Draco snapped. He wasn't going to go die in a corner over some ridiculous Gryffindor.

I'm used to it.

“If anyone else has a problem, they can leave,” Harry said.

Nobody else had a problem.

“Who here needs help with potions?” Harry asked.

A few hands went up.

“Go sit on that side of the room,” Harry said, pointing to a corner. “Draco will help you.”

Harry finished giving instructions, and the kids dispersed throughout the room. Draco walked over to the potion corner and sat down at a desk. The kids stared up at him with huge eyes. Draco’s mind went entirely blank. He cleared his throat, trying to remember why he was there in the first place.

“What do you need help with?” he asked finally.

A Hufflepuff girl in large glasses raised a hesitant hand.

“I don't really understand the properties of aconite,” she said.

A few other kids nodded.

“Aconite? It can seem complicated at first, but it's not if you understand how it reacts with different types of ingredients.”

As Draco explained, he found himself beginning to relax. This was his area of expertise. He did his best to speak concisely and simply, without going on any tangents.

He looked in Harry's direction a few times. Harry looked perfectly at ease, correcting the stances of the students and helping them with incantations. He would make a brilliant teacher.

Once or twice, when Draco looked up, he saw Harry looking back at him. Harry gave him a little wave and tilted his head questioningly. Draco gave him a discreet nod to indicate that everything was going well. Harry grinned at him. Despite himself, Draco smiled back.

The next day, Draco was walking down the corridor toward his transfigurations class. A group of kids, some of them from the tutoring club, were headed in the opposite direction. One of them looked directly at Draco and his eyes lit up in recognition.

The kid opened his mouth. Draco tensed and reinforced his occlumency shields.

“Hi!” the kid said with a wave and a smile.

Draco gaped at him, completely taken aback. By the time he had processed the situation, the boy had passed him.

Later that day, the Hufflepuff girl from the club smiled at him. Another boy waved to him in the Great Hall.

Draco had absolutely no idea how to react. He settled for polite nodding. The old Draco… Well, actually, Draco didn't know what the old him would do if people from other houses started greeting him. It had never happened before. He would have sneered at them, probably.

When he next crossed the dungeons on his way to the brewing room, a Slytherin second-year actually stopped and asked him how his day

was going. Utterly bemused, Draco muttered something vague and continued on his way. The boy called a cheery goodbye after him.

Draco entered the brewing room and put all pleasantries firmly from his mind. He had preparations to make before Harry arrived.

He spent about an hour testing various things and making Harry breathe into various vials. Draco finished recording his findings and automatically flipped the page of his notebook. The next page was blank.

Draco's heart fell.

“Is there anything else you need me to do today?” Harry asked.

“No. There’s nothing else I need you to do at all,” Draco said.

Harry frowned.

“What do you mean?”

“There's no need to continue our potion meetings regularly. I've gotten all the main data I need from you.”

This was a *good* thing, Draco told himself firmly. He had done a crazy amount of research in a very short timespan. This would be enough to get him an apprenticeship with any potioneer in the world. Any potioneer willing to take on someone like him. If Harry ever agreed to release the findings.

“Oh.”

Harry looked disappointed. Like he had actually enjoyed spending time with Draco. Draco knew that he *had*, and that was the strangest part of all this.

Draco was not going to miss this. Not at all, not even one bit. No. Absolutely not. The very notion was ridiculous.

“We can still play quidditch, right?” Harry asked.

All his previous thoughts about not caring crumbled to ash.

“I don't see why not.”

Harry smiled. Even after all this time, it felt so surreal that Harry was smiling because of *him*. Draco felt a pang in his chest. He was happy

that Harry had invited him to continue playing quidditch, of course he was! But he stupidly, selfishly wanted more.

“We should celebrate this!” Harry said.

“How?”

“Let's go down to Hogsmeade,” Harry suggested.

Draco sighed.

“Fine.”

They stopped by the common room to leave their things and grab warmer clothes. It was getting colder outside, especially in the evening. Draco was walking down the stairs when he heard raised voices.

“–with *him?*!"

“Yeah, do you have a problem with that?” Harry’s voice asked.

“What if I do?”

“You can take it and stick it–”

“Boys!” Granger interrupted shrilly.

“But he’s a slimy git!”

Draco's eyes narrowed.

“*Ronald!*”

“I can go wherever I want with whoever I want! I don’t need your permission.”

“Fine!”

Weasley stormed away and up the stairs, where Draco had been listening. Weasley scowled at him.

“Eavesdropping, are you?”

“Easy, Weasley. Didn’t your mother teach you that talking behind people’s backs is wrong?” Draco sneered.

“I’m warning you, Malfoy–”

“Ron,” Harry growled.

Ron glared at Draco one last time before stomping up the stairs. Draco heard his door slam.

He entered the room properly. Granger’s eyes were wide and her hands were pressed over her mouth. Harry looked murderous.

“Let’s go,” he said to Draco after taking a deep breath.

Draco followed him out of the room, something twisting painfully inside him. He was ruining everything for Harry.

“You know, we don’t have to go anywhere,” Draco said.

“What?”

“You should stay here, with your friends,” Draco forced out. “If you want, you can even tell Weasley that you told me to sod off.”

“Draco, what– You’re my friend too! We weren’t fighting because of you, we were fighting because Ron was being a prat! He won’t ruin today for us.”

“Whomever,” Draco said after a pause.

“What?”

“You’ll go wherever you want with *whomever* you want, not whoever you want.”

Harry looked at him strangely for a second, before letting out a peal of laughter.

“What?” Draco asked, unsure whether he should be offended.

“You *would* say something like that.”

Harry looked at Draco fondly.

“I will take that as a compliment,” Draco declared.

They walked into Hogsmeade. Harry led them toward the Three Broomsticks. Draco stopped in his tracks.

“What’s wrong?” Harry asked.

“Not there.”

Harry looked at the pub, then at Draco. Understanding dawned in his eyes.

“Are you sure?”

“I *can’t* go in there.”

“Draco.”

Draco tore his eyes away from the door of the pub and looked at Harry.

“If that’s what you want, then we’ll go somewhere else. But I think that you can.”

Harry was looking at him so *earnestly*. He truly believed in Draco. Harry Potter, always seeing people as better than they really were. Draco wasn’t who Harry thought he was, but *Merlin* did he long to be that person.

That desire was what propelled him to say, “Fine.”

Even if Madam Rosmerta kicked him out or hexed him, it would be worth the smile that lit up Harry’s face at his reply.

Harry pushed open the door to the pub, and Draco stepped inside. The door shut behind them with a heavy thud of a sealing coffin lid.

Madam Rosmerta turned at the sound with a pleasant smile on her face, which died as she saw Draco. For a small eternity, she studied him. Only Harry’s presence at his side prevented him from turning around and fleeing. What should he do? What should he say? Should he say anything at all? *Sorry I used an unforgivable curse on you?!*

“There’s a table available in the back,” Madam Rosmerta said finally.

A weight that he didn’t even know he’d been carrying fell off of Draco’s chest. He crossed the room in a haze and sat down, not really seeing anything. His heart pounded against his ribs, hands going clammy. He was really here.

A mug of butterbeer slammed down in front of him, breaking him from his trance.

“To research!” Harry grinned.

“To research,” Draco repeated.

They tapped their mugs together and drank. Draco felt the knot of tension inside begin to unfurl as the butterbeer warmed his insides.

When Harry set his mug down, some foam stuck to his upper lip.

“If you really want a mustache, I would suggest that you grow it yourself,” Draco drawled.

“But this tastes better,” Harry said, licking his lips clean.

Draco's eyes followed the motion.

What was he *doing*? Draco quickly looked away, clearing his throat. He hoped that the redness of his face from the wind outside masked his blush.

“I, ah… I didn’t find anything about your condition in the books. Other scholars had more difficulty, since their specimens were usually hostile creatures such as inferi and procuring their breath was a lot less… precise. Attempting to reverse Death's Breath was never even one of their considerations,” Draco rambled.

“So I’m your specimen, am I?” Harry snorted.

“*That’s* what you got from all that?” Draco asked indignantly.

“Sorry, sorry.”

Draco rolled his eyes.

“Anything else you’d like?” Madam Rosmerta asked from behind Draco.

Draco jumped violently. Harry made a valiant attempt not to laugh as he straightened.

“No, thank you,” Draco said with all the politeness he could muster. He even tried for a pleasant smile.

“Suit yourself,” Madam Rosmerta shrugged, turning away.

“A-actually…”

She paused.

Draco took a deep breath, knuckles whitening on his mug.

Just say it!

“I'd like to apologize. For everything I did.”

Did he leave it there? Add on? Offer some kind of explanation for his actions? She was looking at him with an unreadable expression.

“You may not forgive me, but… Just…”

Draco felt himself getting tongue-tied. He was doing an *abysmal* job at this!

Madam Rosmerta smirked.

“If it gets you to stop looking at me like I'm about to eat you alive.”

With that, she walked away.

“Was that a yes?” Draco whispered frantically, leaning toward Harry.

“I think it was,” Harry smiled.

Draco took a swig of butterbeer in an attempt to calm his jangling nerves. His hands still shook slightly.

“So… where do you want to go after this?” Harry asked.

Draco shrugged. With some effort, he shifted his thoughts to the actual task at hand. *Focus*.

“Where do you usually go in Hogsmeade?” Harry asked.

“It’s been a while since I’ve been here like this. Last time, we just drank and headed back to the castle.”

“I need to pick up some broom polish,” Harry said.

“Yes, you do. The firebolt deserves to be kept in peak condition,” Draco agreed.

They spent a few minutes chatting about quidditch. When both finished their drinks, Harry tossed some coins onto the table.

“Potter.”

“What?” Harry asked.

“I am perfectly capable of paying for my own drink.”

“Oh, come on. This is your day, you’re the one who did all the hard work researching!”

“Your point?”

Draco tried to shove some coins into Harry’s hands. Harry balled his hands into fists and stepped back.

“This is nothing,” Harry insisted.

“Then let me pay.”

“No.”

Harry darted across the room and out the door. *Ridiculous Gryffindor*! Draco strode after him, cloak billowing. He pushed his way out into the frosty darkness. Harry was waiting. Draco glared at him, but made no further comment.

Later, in the broom store, Draco levitated the coins into the pocket of Harry’s cloak. He threw in an extra galleon. That would show him!

The moon was up when Draco and Harry entered Hogwarts.

“It really feels like winter,” Harry said, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

He frowned, and withdrew his hand with the coins clasped in it.

“That’s weird, I don’t remember…”

He looked up at Draco.

“Draco.”

“Yes?” Draco asked innocently, keeping his face carefully neutral.

“What is this?”

“Money, I presume.”

“How did it get here?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea. Perhaps you should keep better track of your belongings.”

“Git,” Harry muttered, putting the coins back into his pocket.

Draco smiled triumphantly.

“Galleon,” he told the owl portrait.

It blinked blearily at him, before swinging open and allowing the two wizards into the eighth-year common room. Neither Weasley nor Granger were there. Only MacDougal and Blaise, having a quiet conversation. Blaise nodded to Draco before turning back to the Ravenclaw.

Harry and Draco climbed the stairs to the individual rooms. Draco pulled his door open.

“Good night,” Harry said.

“Good night,” Draco responded.

Harry paused, looking for a moment like he wanted to say something else. Draco waited with bated breath.

Harry turned and walked down the corridor toward his room. Draco sighed and shut the door.

Chapter 28: Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Before Harry could blink, it was already the Friday before Christmas. At breakfast, Hermione asked Harry to accompany her and Ron to Hogsmeade to do some shopping. He readily agreed.

After classes, Ron pulled Harry aside, rubbing his long nose nervously.

“Did something happen?” Harry asked immediately.

“No,” Ron assured.

He shifted from one foot to another.

“I haven't the foggiest idea what to get ‘Mione for Christmas!” Ron exclaimed after a moment of silence. “I want it to be something special, not just a book! I want it to be… big!”

Ron made a sweeping gesture with his arm.

“You don't have to get her anything fancy,” Harry said.

“But what if she doesn’t like my gift?” Ron asked earnestly.

Harry grinned.

“Is there anything she could give you that you wouldn’t like?” he asked.

“No. She could give me one of those bloody planners she loves, and I think I’d even use it!” Ron said. He looked horrified at the realization.

“See? Just get her something she likes. You've been dating for a long time, you know her interests.”

“You're right,” Ron nodded, looking relieved. “Thanks, mate.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione wandered down to Hogsmeade. They all had many presents to buy. Harry already knew exactly what he was getting Draco, but it wasn't something you could just get at Hogsmeade. He also wanted to buy him some potion ingredients, but

that was a gift of utility.

Draco had given Harry the idea for his gift to Hermione. He planned to get her some wizarding fiction books. He was going to get Ron a nice new wizard chess set, along with sweets. Harry had no idea what to get for anyone else. He was hoping to find something if he just kept his eyes open.

In the end, he found Neville a book on herbology, a weird, tacky pair of earrings for Luna, a fancy broom kit for Ginny, and a huge bag of candy for the kids in the DA. He made sure to pick up some blood flavored lollipops for Zalina.

The day before everyone left for the holidays arrived. The castle was alive and bustling, with everyone who was leaving packing their trunks. Harry, Ron, and Hermione decided to stay. As Hermione had put it, “This is our last Christmas at Hogwarts. We might as well spend it here.” And as Ron had added, “Even if you stay here as a teacher, Harry. This is your last chance to party as one of us before you have to be *responsible*.”

One by one, the lights in the castle’s windows extinguished as people went to bed, preparing for a busy day. Harry, Ron, and Hermione had gone on a late stroll around the castle grounds. They were technically pushing the limits of curfew, but nobody was around to stop them. Hermione reminisced about past Christmases. Harry mostly listened with a melancholy smile, remembering his own first Christmas at Hogwarts. He still had the now far too small jumper in his trunk somewhere.

They returned to the common room and parted, wishing each other good night. In the corridor, Harry noticed faint light coming from under the door labeled *Draco Malfoy*. Draco was likely still packing.

Harry knocked softly.

Draco yanked the door open with a scowl. He was dressed in his ridiculous silk pajamas.

“Of course it’s you,” he muttered. “What do you want?”

Harry was taken aback by the rudeness.

“Nothing, just to say hello.”

“Great, you said it. Is that all?”

Harry studied Draco with concern. His eyes were rimmed with red, and he looked ruffled.

“Is everything alright?” Harry asked.

“Of course. Everything is bloody brilliant! I might just die of laughter,” Draco snapped viciously.

“Can I come inside?” Harry asked.

“You’re the Chosen One, who am I to stop you?”

Harry stepped into the room and shut the door. A packed trunk stood at the foot of Draco’s bed.

“What happened?” Harry asked.

The scowl slowly slid off of Draco’s face, revealing a lost, desperate look in his eyes. He rubbed his forehead.

“The winter holidays.”

The winter holidays? But… *Oh.*

“The manor?”

Draco nodded, turning away. He crossed his arms, staring at the wall.

“Could you just not go?” Harry asked.

“*Just not go*?” Draco asked, every word dripping with venom. “My mother is stuck there. I’ve been selfish enough without leaving her alone for the holidays too.”

Seeing him like this made something twist in Harry’s chest. He placed his hand on Draco’s shoulder. He was shivering.

“I don’t want to go back,” Draco whispered.

Harry pulled him into a hug. He wanted to hold him forever, to shield him from the cruel world outside.

After a beat, Draco hugged Harry back with desperation, burying his face deep in Harry's shoulder as Harry tightened his arms. His soft, blond hair tickled Harry's cheek.

“If you need to come back, I'll be here. At any time.”

“Thank you.”

After a moment, he pulled away.

“You should go to bed,” he said hollowly. “Get rest.”

Harry gave a slow nod. He recognized the dismissal when he heard it, but he didn't want to leave Draco like this. But… he shouldn't overstay his welcome.

He opened his mouth to say something, anything, to take the emotions inside and give them shape, releasing them into the open. But no words came.

“Good night, then," he said, trying to pack everything into those words.

“Good night.”

“Can I walk you to the train later?”

“I'm going by floo powder.”

That was that, then.

“Enjoy your Christmas,” Draco said.

“I hope you have a good one too.”

Draco smirked humorlessly, and shut the door.

Having spent the night before Christmas partying with his friends, Harry woke up on Christmas Day with a hangover. When he finally managed to get up, he found a pile of presents at the foot of his bed. Through the light frost of his window, he saw that Hogwarts was covered in snow. All the trees, except the Whomping Willow, were enveloped in a white blanket. Lazy snowflakes continued to fall, dancing past Harry’s window.

Ron had gotten him a pile of sweets and a Chudley Cannons poster. Seeing it made Harry laugh out loud, because he had gotten Ron an absolutely identical one. From Hermione, he got a hand-knitted Gryffindor scarf and a book about teaching. Mrs. Weasley had sent him a gold jumper with a red letter H on the front. From Luna, Harry

received what looked like a very tangled necklace that he had no clue what to do with. Neville sent some rare plants to use as potion ingredients, which Harry was very thankful for. Draco would be happy.

At the bottom of the pile, Harry saw a letter, with his name written on it in familiar handwriting. He opened it and read the emerald green ink.

Potter,

I trust you are enjoying yourself at Hogwarts. There is no need for further pleasantries when writing to a correspondent such as you, so I'll get to business. I am writing to cordially invite you to Malfoy Manor for dinner on New Year's eve. I understand if you do not wish to attend, however, if you do, I expect you at nine o'clock sharp. I'll open the manor wards so you can apparate in.

Sincerely,

Draco L. Malfoy

P. S.,

With this letter, I sent a little something to keep you company. Perhaps I should not have, as your head is big enough already.

Harry felt the envelope, and found that there was something else inside. He flipped it over and shook it. A small object fell into his hand. He lifted it, and saw that it was a collectible figurine of himself.

"Prat," Harry muttered, even as a grin spread across his face. This was exactly the kind of thing Draco would do.

Mini Harry was holding a broom and a wand, which he was waving around.

His door opened, and Ron and Hermione walked in. Both were grinning ear to ear. Harry shoved the toy into his pocket.

"Look what Ron got me!" Hermione exclaimed.

She was waving her gift around so excitedly that it took Harry a solid minute to get a good look at it.

“Enchanted knitting needles, and a book of charms for clothing!” Hermione said excitedly. “You can cast some of them while knitting, so they're woven into the fabric itself! I wish I'd had it sooner, so I could enchant your scarf!”

Hermione continued explaining the spells excitedly. Harry gave Ron a discreet nod. Ron gave him a thumbs-up.

The rest of the day passed in a warm glow. Harry scribbled a quick letter to Draco, telling him that he, Harry, would be there. Harry, Hermione, and the Weasleys apparated to the Burrow and celebrated. They all stayed overnight before returning to Hogwarts.

The next day, Harry helped Ron break in his new chess set with a spectacular loss. Zabini, who had been watching, took his place across from Ron, and soon the two of them were debating strategy. The debate almost escalated into a fight, which Harry and Parkinson futilely tried to break up—

“*–Harry, he thinks that the* King's Indian *is the best defense, it's obviously the caro!*”

“*–Weasley, you play the* London system!”

—until Parkinson drew their ire by declaring that chess was stupid and anyone who played it was a nerd, regardless of opening.

However, throughout the holidays, Harry found himself missing Draco. If a few months ago, someone had told him that he would miss Draco Malfoy, Harry would have recommended them a visit to Saint Mungos. However, that was the position in which he found himself. His thoughts circled back to the pale wizard over and over again. Harry couldn't wait to see him.

The day before New Year’s Eve, Harry asked Hermione if she could help him magically tailor his dress robes from fourth year.

“Why do you need them?” Hermione asked curiously.

Harry hesitated. He didn’t want to distress Hermione.

“Draco invited me to Malfoy Manor for dinner tomorrow,” he said slowly.

Hermione looked surprised, but nodded.

“And you’re *going*?” Ron asked incredulously.

“Well, yeah."

“What if it’s a trap, and there are death eaters waiting for you there?” Ron asked.

Anger began to rise within Harry.

“Really, Ron?”

“What? This is Malfoy we’re talking about!”

“Ron, he’s been helping me all year!”

“Maybe he just wanted you to trust him so he could-”

“So he could do *what*? Kill me in his own house? He’s not stupid!”

“Then it’s all for attention. He wants to– to use your fame so that people think he’s good!”

“Are you serious right now?” Harry snapped. His good mood popped like a balloon.

“Harry, I understand your feelings, but are you sure?” Hermione asked.

Harry glared at the two of them.

“If he does something to me while I am at his house, then it's going to be really bloody obvious that he did it. If he wanted to do something to me and didn't care about the consequences, then he could have poisoned me a dozen times over already!”

“I'll help you with your dress robes,” Hermione said, standing up.

Harry nodded to her thankfully.

“Are you seriously planning to go to Draco's house in your fourth year dress robes?” Zabini asked.

Harry spun around. Blaise Zabini was lounging on one of the armchairs, looking at the trio from under lowered lids.

“You were eavesdropping,” Ron accused.

“You weren't exactly keeping your voices down,” Zabini noted.

He had a point.

“Potter, I would not recommend showing up to New Years at Malfoy Manor in robes that went out of fashion years before you first saw them,” Zabini said.

“They were good dress robes!” Harry said defensively.

“You wore them well, Draco was whining about it all night, but you're not fourteen anymore. It's not enough to simply look good. You need to be fashionable.”

“What do you recommend, then?” Harry asked, trying to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

“Visit Felix’s Fitting in Diagon Alley. He may be booked for the holidays, but I'm sure he'll have time for the chosen one.”

Harry frowned.

“Apparate from Hogsmeade. You'll find it across from Flourish and Blotts.”

“Thanks,” Harry said awkwardly.

“You're welcome, Potter.”

“I take it you don't need my help anymore?” Hermione asked.

“I guess not.”

“We can still go with you to Diagon Alley,” Hermione suggested.

Harry smiled at her thankfully. He really didn't want to go alone.

“We can get ice cream, right, Ronald?”

Threatening notes slipped into her voice.

“Yes,” Ron muttered.

“Great,” Hermione said with a huge grin.

Harry pushed open the doors to the shop and walked inside by himself. It looked very fancy. Harry held a pouch of galleons he had

gotten at Gringotts.

A tall, wiry man with an expressive face leaped to his side. All Harry had to do was mutter something about dress robes for a New Years dinner, and the man, Felix himself, whisked him into a fitting room. He measured, compared and held up fabrics, and talked all at the same time and all at the speed of light. He finally ushered Harry out, his money bag significantly lighter, promising to owl him the dress robes by ten that night. He assured Harry that the robes would be the peak of fashion, and they would fit him perfectly.

The next day, Harry unwrapped his dress robes. They were a dark shade of green, almost black. They fit him perfectly, and made him look…. Good. He tried to smooth his hair down, but gave up after a few minutes. He grabbed his clumsily wrapped gift for Draco and strolled down to Hogsmeade to apparate. The windows of the houses under snow-covered roofs were illuminated by candles, making them look cozy. Harry actually got to Hogsmeade there ten minutes early. He decided to wait for the designated time before apparating, in case Draco hadn't opened the wards yet.

Dark thoughts chased each other through Harry's mind. The last time he'd been at Malfoy Manor hadn't exactly been fun. Additionally, he realized with dawning horror, he had absolutely no idea what to expect. He didn't know if the dinner was going to be formal, he didn't know who was going to be there, he didn't know if anyone else would be there at all. He imagined an evening of tense conversation with Narcissa and Draco Malfoy and shuddered. He could speak with Draco, but his mother? Harry wasn't sophisticated or elegant like Draco was. He didn't know the first thing about pure-blood dinners. Harry imagined a table set with fancy silverware that he didn't know how to use. Well, if that happened, he would just watch Draco and hope for the best.

Finally, it was nine o'clock. Harry imagined the exterior of Malfoy Manor as clearly as he could, and apparated with a crack.

He appeared on the marble steps directly in front of the looming door. Almost immediately, it flew open, revealing a female house elf.

"You is being Mister Potter, Sir?"

"Yes, I'm him. I mean, I am. I'm Harry Potter."

What an amazing start.

“My name is being Tillie. Come with me,” the house elf said, bowing to Harry.

Harry followed the house elf down the corridors. He couldn't help but notice that Malfoy Manor seemed more bare compared to when he'd seen it last. He couldn't remember anything specific, but he was sure that there'd been more artifacts and decorations instead of just stone walls.

The house elf stopped outside the dining room. Harry straightened his robes, ran his hand through his hair in a final futile attempt to get it to lay neatly, and stepped through the doorway.

Draco and his mother were sitting at a long table set for five. Both rose to greet him. Draco was wearing silver robes similar in cut to Harry's, and a single emerald on a silver chain around his neck. His face was set in his ‘pureblood expression’, and his posture was flawless. Draco briefly looked Harry up and down and seemed pleasantly surprised.

Harry studied him with growing concern. The circles under Draco's eyes had returned, and he was paler than usual. In fact, as Harry examined him more intently, Draco looked almost as ill as he had in the beginning of the school year.

Mrs. Malfoy was wearing deep blue robes and matching blue earrings. Her blonde hair was twisted into an elegant knot on top of her head. Her face looked a lot like Draco's, but less… pointy. She had the same arrogant curve to her mouth, high cheekbones, and arching eyebrows as her son. Thin, almost unnoticeable wrinkles lined her face.

“Good evening,” Draco's mother greeted.

“Good evening, Mrs. Malfoy,” Harry responded politely.

“Please, call me Narcissa.”

“Sit,” Draco said, gesturing to the seat next to him.

Harry walked over to the table and sat down.

“Thank you for inviting me,” Harry said to fill the silence.

“On the contrary, we should be thanking you for accepting our invitation. I understand that this house is not the most pleasant place for you to be,” Narcissa said.

By the cloud that passed over her face, Harry thought that it may not be the most pleasant place for her to be, either. For the first time, he considered how house arrest may be affecting her.

“Will there be more people?” Harry asked, looking at the empty plates.

“Yes. Draco has not told you?”

Narcissa sent her son a reproachful glance. Draco stiffened slightly.

“When I was sending Harry his invitation, we had not yet received a response,” he said.

“My sister will be attending, with her grandson.”

For a wild moment, Harry thought Narcissa was talking about Bellatrix. Then his brain turned on and reminded him that Bellatrix couldn't attend because she had come down with a serious case of death. By process of elimination, Narcissa was talking about Andromeda Tonks.

Teddy. Harry had only seen him once. He suddenly felt very guilty. He was Teddy's godfather, after all!

Right on cue, a chime rang. The Malfoys looked up.

“That's the floo,” Draco explained. “They must be here.”

A moment later, Andromeda Tonks entered the room with Teddy in her arms.

She looked older than when Harry had seen her last, with grey streaks in her hair. Of course, she'd lost a daughter. New guilt crashed down on Harry.

“Andromeda.”

“Narcissa.”

Narcissa's face remained impassive, but Harry saw longing in her eyes.

“Do you mind?” Andromeda asked, gesturing to a chair.

“Of course,” Narcissa said.

Andromeda transfigured it into a high chair and placed Teddy in it.

“Teddy, this is your cousin Draco and your godfather Harry,” Andromeda said.

“It's good to see you again. I'm so sorry, I should have reached out earlier, I…”

Andromeda raised a hand, cutting Harry off.

“You've done enough for us,” she smiled. “Worry about your studies, be young while you can. Teddy isn't going anywhere.”

Teddy looked very calm for a one year old. He was so tiny. Harry discreetly made a funny face at him. Teddy laughed delightedly. His eyes turned bright green. Harry smiled sadly, remembering Remus and Tonks. Meanwhile, Teddy’s hair turned platinum blond, matching Draco's.

“Please, sit,” Narcissa said, gesturing to the remaining chair. Andromeda sat down by her grandson.

“Good evening, Draco,” Andromeda said.

“Good evening, Aunt Andromeda,” Draco said politely.

“We are glad to have you here. It's been a long time since we've had a child in this house,” Narcissa said.

She looked at Draco pointedly. Draco gave a barely audible exhale of annoyance with a tight-lipped smile.

The door opened, and Tillie entered the room. She was levitating plates full of food toward the table.

“Thank you, Tillie,” Harry said.

Tillie looked at the Malfoys with wide eyes, bowed, and scurried away without saying a word.

Harry looked down at his plate. Luckily, there was only one set of silverware.

“Wine?” Narcissa offered.

Harry looked up, and realized she was talking to him.

“No, thank you,” he said politely.

Narcissa looked to Andromeda.

“I'll have a glass,” Andromeda acquiesced.

With a graceful flick of her wand, Narcissa levitated the bottle of wine to Andromeda, then filled both Draco's and her own glasses.

“What will you have to drink then?” she asked Harry.

“Just water,” Harry said, uncomfortable.

With an aguamenti, his glass was full.

Dinner consisted of a few fancy yet delicious dishes. Harry ate and listened to the light conversation held up by the Malfoys. He responded to questions when asked. Thankfully, nobody pried into his life. Andromeda was incredibly polite and, while upholding the conversation, volunteered no information other than what was strictly necessary.

When the last course vanished, Narcissa suggested that Harry and Draco keep Teddy company for a bit so that she could give her sister a tour of the grounds. Harry agreed to the idea with enthusiasm. Andromeda agreed as well and handed Teddy off to Harry.

Harry carefully lifted Teddy. He seemed so fragile. Teddy looked at him with large, innocent eyes, which shifted back to green as his hair darkened. A small lightning scar appeared on his forehead. Harry smiled at him.

Draco led the way out of the dining room. The second they were out of sight, his whole demeanor shifted. The cold, haughty mask dropped from his face, revealing a gaunt, tired boy. His shoulders curved under an invisible weight.

“Are you alright?” Harry asked in concern.

“Being back here has been… more difficult than I expected.”

Harry frowned. What would Draco do after Hogwarts, when he lived at home all year long? Worry grew in his chest.

“Where should we go?” Harry asked, nodding to Teddy.

“There isn't really a place for children at the manor,” Draco said. “We can go to the parlor, at least there's a carpet there.”

Harry followed Draco through the grim corridors, shuddering at the thought of living here. Malfoy Manor looked like a place meant for ghosts, not people. He imagined Draco wandering the halls, looking more like a ghost than a living human himself.

They came to the parlor, a large room with a green carpet. Harry set Teddy down, and he immediately crawled over to Draco. The pale wizard sat down on the floor, tucking his long legs underneath him. Harry watched fondly as he conjured some bubbles out of his wand to make Teddy laugh.

“You'd be a good father,” Harry said.

To his surprise, Draco grimaced.

“Merlin and Morgana, not you too,” he muttered.

Harry tilted his head questioningly. Draco sighed.

“Mother wants me to find a nice, eligible girl and settle down with her. It was a blow for her when the Greengrasses broke off Astoria's betrothal to me, but I don't know why it came as a surprise to her. The Malfoys are not exactly popular at the moment.”

Harry's mind struggled to catch up, still stuck on the casually dropped word *betrothal*.

“Wait, you're *betrothed?!*” he asked disbelievingly.

“No. I just told you that the Greengrasses *broke off* the engagement. Do you need your hearing checked as well as your eyesight?” Draco drawled.

Harry was so lost in thought that he didn't acknowledge the jibe.

“Fine, you *were* betrothed?”

“Yes, Potter. It's not that rare.”

“For how long?”

“Since before Hogwarts. It often happens like that in pureblood families. Two children are born, their parents want a political alliance, and they arrange a betrothal for their children.”

“Since *before Hogwarts?!*”

“Are you going to repeat every word I say?” Draco snapped.

“But that's awful!”

“Why?”

Harry blinked, thrown. *Why?!*

“Because people should get married because of love, not political alliances!”

Teddy crawled into Harry's lap. Harry picked him up.

“Some purebloods marry out of love. My parents, for example. It's a rare thing, but it happens.”

“Your parents married for love?” Harry asked incredulously.

Draco's face turned cold. Harry wanted to swallow his own tongue as he realized how the words had sounded.

“*Yes*, Potter. As difficult as it may be for you to believe, my parents loved each other,” Draco said icily.

Harry noted the past tense.

“Sorry, I didn't mean to imply–”

“It's fine.”

Harry conjured some sparks from his wand, making Teddy laugh, before looking back at Draco.

“So now, you're not betrothed anymore? Isn’t that good?” Harry asked carefully.

“Yes and no.”

Harry waited for him to elaborate.

Draco sighed. The circles under his eyes seemed to grow more prominent.

“To you, all this seems strange. It's different for me. I grew up knowing that I was going to marry some pureblood girl. I know Astoria. She's nice, and funny. She is by far not the worst person to spend my life with. We grew used to the idea of marriage together,”

Draco explained. He seemed to be weighing every word he said.

“We do not love each other in the way that you think marriage should require, but we are… *were*… friends. It was a satisfactory arrangement.”

Harry tried to understand. Draco was right, he had grown up away from pureblood customs. The idea of Draco marrying some girl was *very* unpleasant.

“Now, I don't know what’s going to happen. Mother is going to try to get me married to some pureblood witch. She's desperate for grandchildren, and I can't even blame her. It's awful for her, being stuck here alone.”

Draco paused, distracted by Teddy. He spelled some more bubbles into existence. Teddy's hair turned iridescent, matching the bubbles he tried to grab.

Harry waited silently. He didn't even want to breathe, in case he broke Draco's talkative mood.

“In a way,” Draco continued, “...it was easier when I was betrothed. Now, my mother is actually going to want my opinion on the girls she invites for tea. She won't be happy when I'm not interested in any of them.”

Harry was confused. Draco seemed very confident that he wouldn't like any of the hypothetical girls.

“Well, maybe you'll meet a girl you like, and you'll fall in love.”

The words were difficult to say for some reason.

Draco let out a humorless laugh.

“Potter, I'm gay.”

What.

Harry blinked. His mind spun, struggling to process the information and its implications.

“Wait, but then… But you were betrothed to a girl!”

“Yes,” Draco said, like he was talking to a slow child. “I was betrothed to a girl, because the Malfoy line needs heirs.”

“But…” Harry trailed off, unsure how to formulate his next question.

“I don't see why a gay man being betrothed to a woman is worse than a straight woman being betrothed to a man she doesn't love,” Draco shrugged.

Harry tried to think of arguments, but he couldn't counter Draco's final statement.

“The whole thing is wrong,” he said finally. “What would you have done if you’d married Astoria after all? Does she know?”

Draco tapped his fingers on the floor, patience running out. Harry was surprised it had taken this long.

“Pureblood marriage is different. Your literal only job is to conceive an heir. After and even before you've done that, you can take lovers left and right. As long as you do not have any children with them, which I would not be in danger of, it's not even really frowned upon. *That* is what I would have done.”

By Draco's snappy tone of voice, Harry could tell that the conversation was over. It had given him a lot to think about.

Teddy looked at Draco and tilted his head. Draco exhaled, seeming to deflate.

“Sorry for prying,” Harry said carefully.

“It's fine, Potter. All this must seem so stupid to you. It shouldn't matter, not after everything that's happened.”

“It's not stupid to worry about the future,” Harry said, a touch too vehemently.

Draco looked up, raising a perfect eyebrow.

“Oh my, does the chosen one himself experience doubts?” he asked.

“That is exactly the problem,” Harry said. “I’m the chosen one. It's stupid, really. I have this *reputation*.”

“People see your scar and… assume things,” Draco murmured. His hand tugged at his left sleeve.

Harry nodded.

“Well, worry not. Any person who speaks with you for longer than five seconds is immediately disabused of any presumptuous notions, and sees you for who you are. An annoying prat.”

Harry snorted. Draco was refreshing in that sense. He never hesitated to put Harry in his place, regardless of his hero status.

Draco lifted Teddy and tickled his side. Teddy laughed. The sound pierced the thick, tense atmosphere. Harry could physically feel the air lighten.

“Oh!” he exclaimed, remembering something. “I have your present!”

“I have something for you as well. Wait here.”

Draco handed Teddy off to Harry, stood, and strode out of the room. While he was gone, Harry entertained Teddy by creating sparks and levitating things. He didn't know the spell for making bubbles that Draco had used.

Draco returned with two large packages. Harry pulled his gifts for Draco out of his pocket, and reversed the shrinking charm he'd placed on them. Draco sat back down on the floor, close enough to Harry for their shoulders to brush.

“I don’t know if you want to open them now or later,” Harry said, handing the parcels to Draco.

Draco handed him his gifts. They were perfectly wrapped in green paper. Next to them, Harry's attempts at packaging looked clumsy.

“I'll open them now,” Draco said. “What about you?”

“Me too,” Harry said.

Draco began opening the first gift. His long, pale fingers carefully unwrapped it, making sure not to rip anything. Harry shook his head in exasperation.

Draco took out the case of potions ingredients, opened it, and looked inside. He picked up the various boxes and vials, brows rising higher with each one.

“These must have cost you a fortune!” Draco exclaimed.

Harry shrugged.

“I have the money.”

“Well, I appreciate the generosity. Your turn.”

Harry weighed the two packages in his hands. He finally picked one and began tearing at the paper. Draco grimaced, watching him mutilate the packaging.

“Careful, they’re fragile,” he warned.

He actually looked *nervous*, which was ridiculous. Harry would be happy with whatever Draco got him. Hell, he'd even liked the stupid action figure!

Inside the packaging was an ornate wooden case with something clinking inside. Harry opened it, and saw rows and rows of vials. Each one was labeled in Draco’s elegant handwriting. Harry read some of the labels and saw, among others, Pepper Up and Dreamless Sleep.

“I brewed those for you with the reversal effect in mind, they should last you a while. There's an undetectable extension charm on the box. If you need more, I can always make more, but that should last you for a good while,” Draco rambled, smoothing back a stray strand of hair.

“It's great! Thank you. It must have taken you ages to figure out how to brew all this,” Harry interrupted, a smile stretching across his face.

“I will choose to take that as fascination with the gift, rather than an insult to my brewing skills,” Draco smirked, relief flashing in his eyes.

Harry rolled his eyes.

“Now the other one,” Draco said.

“Together?” Harry asked, gesturing at the unopened parcel in Draco's hands.

“You're ridiculous, Potter,” Draco sighed, but didn't argue.

At the same time, they began opening their gifts. Harry finished first, revealing a stack of books. He recognized them as the books Draco had made him take from the school library, works of classic wizarding fiction. Among the books he’d already read, Harry saw a few new titles.

“You seemed to like the books I recommended to you, so I thought

you may want to own them," Draco explained, continuing to unwrap his own gift. "I hope you like them."

"Are you joking? This is amazing!"

Draco smiled. Harry enjoyed the rare sight.

Draco finally finished opening his gift, and some books tumbled into his lap.

"Honestly, Potter, can you not even give a gift without imitating a higher mind?" Draco smirked.

"Great minds think alike," Harry said.

"While I appreciate that you consider my mind great, I wouldn't say the same of yours," Draco muttered distractedly, looking through the books.

Harry had ordered them from a muggle bookstore. The Lord of the Rings and the Silmarillion, the Narnia series, the Once and Future King, and other similar works.

"They're classic muggle fantasy books. You like reading, so... They're about magic from a muggle's perspective," Harry explained.

Worries plagued his mind. What if Draco didn't like them? He wasn't a huge fan of muggle things.

Draco got to the very bottom book. A collection of Shakespeare's best works.

Harry's worried thoughts screeched to a halt as Draco looked up with a wide grin on his face. Harry hadn't known the pale boy could smile like that. It was as though the clouds had cleared, revealing a full moon shining from the starry sky.

"Thank you," Draco said.

Harry wanted to respond but all thoughts had fled his mind, replaced by Draco's smile. All he could do was nod as a giddy grin rose to his lips.

Teddy crawled over to the piano in a corner.

"Do you play?" Harry asked.

Draco nodded.

“Not as well as my mother,” he admitted.

“Can you play something?”

Draco rose to his feet with catlike grace. He sat down at the piano, lifted the lid, and positioned his slender fingers on the keys.

Draco began to play. A melancholy, haunting melody poured out of the instrument. Harry watched Draco’s pale fingers dance over the keys with breathtaking speed. It was almost hypnotizing.

When the music ended, Harry was left dazed and filled with longing for something faraway, but at the same time, emptied.

“That was… Magical,” he said.

“In a way, music is magic,” Draco responded.

“Well said,” Andromeda said.

Draco straightened and turned toward the door, mask sliding back into place. The two women stood there.

“Thank you,” he responded with a polite nod.

“If you do not mind, I will take Teddy back now. It's past his bedtime.”

Something occurred to Harry.

“I don't have a gift for Teddy!” he exclaimed.

“That's quite alright. You didn't know that we would be here.”

Harry shook his head, devastated. Andromeda lifted Teddy into her arms.

“I have no gift for you, either. We must meet later and remedy this problem,” Andromeda smiled.

“Gladly!” Harry grinned. “Just name a day!”

Andromeda nodded with a smile.

“I will write to you,” she promised.

“Draco, you can give our guest a tour of the gardens,” Narcissa suggested.

“Of course,” Draco responded.

The women left with Teddy. Draco led Harry outside, pausing to don a warm cloak and boots. Tillie popped into existence with Harry's coat, which he pulled on before exiting the manor.

“The grounds are mostly gardens now. My mother has been tending them, along with the house elves,” Draco explained as they walked.

“Your mother doesn't seem like the gardening type,” Harry said, trying to suppress a mental image of Narcissa Malfoy degnoming a garden.

“Well, there isn't exactly an overabundance of things for her to do.”

Harry conceded the point. An *overabundance of things*... Of course Draco would casually use a word like that.

Outside, the ground was covered in a thin layer of snow. It sparkled in the moonlight, crunching underfoot as Harry followed Draco down a path toward the gardens. With a wave of his wand, Draco conjured floating lights above them. The flowers bloomed colorfully, despite the season.

“How are they alive?” Harry asked, touching a petal. It was warm.

“Magic,” Draco said, lips twitching.

“It’s beautiful here,” Harry said sincerely.

It was an understatement. The colors of the flowers against the gleaming white snow, illuminated by the moon and Draco's lights looked… Enchanting.

“Yes. The gardens are my favorite part of the manor. They weren't as colorful before the war, and completely neglected when the dark lord lived here. Almost everything here is new. No bad memories.”

The last sentence was said quietly, almost as an afterthought.

They walked in silence, breathing in the cool nighttime air. Their breath created small clouds which quickly faded, only to be replaced by new ones.

“Which flowers are your favorite?” Harry asked.

“This way.”

Draco led Harry down a narrow path that led slightly off to the side. He pointed to a bush covered with pure white roses.

“I've never seen white roses before,” Harry said, touching one of the flowers. “They're beautiful.”

Draco leaned in, buried his nose in one of the flowers, and inhaled deeply. Harry followed suit. The fragrance of the roses was beautiful and familiar. Draco’s room smelled that way.

A bench was tucked into the space between two rose bushes. Harry imagined Draco sitting there with a book.

“Shall we continue? I'm sure you'd like to see the rest of the gardens.”

They kept walking. Harry hadn't been in many gardens in his life, so he couldn't say much other than that the flowers were pretty. Definitely more beautiful than any others he'd seen.

More often than the flowers, though, he snuck looks at Draco. With him, even the Dursley's stupid flower bed would be an enjoyable location for a walk.

One of the last flowers in the gardens caught Harry's eye. Lilies. They stood out from the snow, burning orange. Harry crouched down next to them and inhaled their fragrance. The scent unexpectedly brought tears to his eyes. The lily smelled like childhood, long forgotten and lost forever.

A pale, slender hand reached past him and plucked one of the flowers. Harry watched Draco cup the lily in his hand and whisper a spell, too quietly to hear. Then, he offered it to Harry.

Harry took the lily, looking at it closely. Draco's spell had covered it with a thin layer of ice. It gleamed and glittered in the light as Harry turned it in his fingers.

“It's perfect,” he said.

Draco smiled. Harry turned the flower in his fingers, trying to figure out where he could put it.

“Like this,” Draco said.

He took the flower and tucked it into Harry’s lapel, right over his

heart.

The tip of Draco's nose was tinged pink from the chill, and reflections of the magic lights danced in his eyes. His hair gleamed white in the moonlight. He was beautiful.

Their eyes met.

Deep inside the manor, a clock began to strike. Draco seemed to realize that his hands were still resting on Harry's chest. He lowered them to his sides. Both Harry and Draco turned toward the manor. Their shoulders brushed. Neither moved away.

The twelfth strike sounded.

“Happy new year,” Harry said.

“Happy new year,” Draco echoed.

Driven by a sudden urge, Harry took Draco's cold fingers in his. Draco looked at him in surprise, color rising to his face.

“I'm glad I came,” Harry said.

“So am I,” Draco said quietly, looking at their entwined fingers.

Chapter End Notes

> This is it, the chapter my 2nd ever reader liked the most! Shout out to him. This was a long one, but we are almost there!

Chapter 29: Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

In the morning, Harry headed down to breakfast with his friends. They talked and laughed, but Harry's eyes kept wandering over to the Slytherin table. Harry wondered what Draco was doing and whether he was alright. He was actually *worried* about *Draco Malfoy*. Their conversation from New Year's played itself over and over again in his mind. Something tightened in his chest every time he remembered the moment in the gardens. The way Draco had looked at him, the way his face had shone, the way the snow reflected in his gray eyes–

"Harry!"

"Yeah?" Harry asked, looking up.

Hermione was looking at him in a mixture of concern and exasperation.

"I said your name three times," she said.

"Sorry," Harry said, running a hand through his hair.

"It's alright. Do you want to take a walk?"

Harry shrugged his assent and stood up. He accompanied Hermione out of the Great Hall.

"You've been a bit distracted lately," Hermione said. She had her *I'm worried that Harry is being weird but I don't want to hurt his feelings* face on.

"Everything's fine, 'Mione," Harry said with fondness.

"Have you been having nightmares?" Hermione asked gently.

Her tone didn't annoy him as much as it once would have.

"No, actually. Draco brewed me enough dreamless sleep potions to last for my whole life," Harry said with a smile.

Hermione studied him with a finger pressed to her lips. She had shifted to her problem-solving face.

“How was your visit to the manor, anyway?” she asked.

“It was good! Teddy was there. I got to talk to Draco. I think he liked my gifts.”

Hermione was now pursing her lips to hide a smile.

“I'm sure he did,” she assured, patting his arm.

They exited the castle. A few first years were having an overly enthusiastic snowball fight.

“You two have been spending quite a bit of time together,” Hermione noted casually. Too casually.

“Yes,” Harry replied.

“You seem to have gotten quite close.”

“I guess we have,” Harry said with a self-satisfied smile.

“He's good for you, as strange as that is to say.”

Harry nodded.

“Is he why you've been distracted?” Hermione asked.

“Yes,” Harry admitted after a pause.

Hermione lifted her hand to hide a grin.

“What, what is it?”

“Nothing, nothing.”

“Tell me!”

“I said it's nothing!”

“Hermione…”

Hermione sighed.

“Harry,” she began, in a business-like voice. “Do you think that you may…”

Hermione paused.

“That I may what?”

Hermione sighed in exasperation.

“Merlin, I can't do this! You need to figure it out by yourself!”

“This isn't a homework assignment!” Harry argued. He was very, very curious as to what Hermione had to say.

Hermione stamped her foot, muttering something about idiot boys. Her face had shifted firmly into *I can't believe how stupid you are* territory.

“You *fancy* him, Harry!” she burst out.

Harry's mouth fell open. His first reflex was to deny the claim, but as he thought about it…

“Merlin’s beard. You're right!”

Harry threw his head back, staring at the sky blankly.

“I like *bloody* Draco Malfoy!”

Hermione sighed.

“I'm going back to the castle,” she said.

“Mhm.”

Hermione walked away, shaking her head. Harry continued walking without comprehending anything around him. *I fancy Draco Malfoy.* Draco filled his mind. His hair, his eyes, the slight quirk of his lip when he was secretly amused, the circles under his eyes when he was exhausted, his cutting sarcasm when he was uncomfortable, his witty quips when they were alone. The way Harry wanted to feel his hair, the way he wanted to hug him when he had nightmares, the way he fit perfectly in Harry's arms even though he was taller. Their seeker matches, the way Harry was happy even when he lost because he got to see Draco smile, the way his hand still tingled where it had touched Draco's. The way Draco furrowed his brow in concentration when he was brewing something in their little room. Everything clicked into place. How hadn't he realized it himself?!

“Fuck.”

What was he going to do?

“You want to know *what?”*

Blaise Zabini looked at Harry with interest.

“Pureblood courting traditions,” Harry said, crossing his arms. He could feel his face heating up under Zabini's scrutiny.

“There's nothing too crazy. You go on walks, give each other flowers. Rings are a common gift further on in the relationship. Some old-fashioned families, such as the Blacks and the Malfoys…”

Zabini gave Harry a knowing look.

“...exchange lockets containing a lock of hair. But that doesn't happen until further on in the relationship.”

Harry nodded. *Flowers, rings, lockets with hair.*

“Now if you'll excuse me, I believe I need to speak with Pansy.”

Pansy.

"Um, Zabini?"

"Yes?"

"There's nothing between Parkinson and Draco, right?"

Zabini threw back his head and laughed aloud. He didn't bother hiding his grin or the incredulous shaking of his head as he walked away.

Draco threw a handful of floo powder into the manor’s fireplace.

“Hogwarts,” he said.

He stepped out of the fireplace in McGonagall’s office, and dusted himself off with a flick of his wand. The second he was out of the manor, it felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

“Welcome back,” Professor McGonagall said.

“Thank you.”

He walked out of the office toward the eighth-year common room, levitating his trunk in front of him. He carried his broomstick in his

hands.

When Draco stepped into the common room, Harry was waiting.

“You brought your broom!” he exclaimed in place of a greeting.

“Yes. The school brooms are abysmal,” Draco responded.

Harry followed him up the stairs toward his room. He paused in the doorway as Draco began to unpack. Harry’s foot was bouncing, and he was biting his lip.

“What do you want?” Draco asked.

“Will you go to Hogsmeade with me?” Harry asked.

Draco looked up.

“It’s a Hogsmeade weekend. Everyone will be there.”

“I don’t care,” Harry said obstinately.

“Can’t you go with Weasley and Granger?” Draco asked.

He already knew that he would say yes. How could he refuse when Harry was looking at him like that?

“They’re on a date. Besides, I spent the entire holidays with them. I want to spend time with *you*.”

“Fine.”

Draco would never admit it, but he had missed Harry. He wanted to walk through Hogsmeade with him and forget all his troubles, shedding the manor's shadow.

They grabbed their coats and scarves, and meandered outside. It was snowing. Their boots left prints on the ground, which were soon covered up by a fresh layer of powder.

Draco didn’t want to talk. Fragments of dark thoughts from the manor still inhabited his mind. Harry seemed to understand this. He looked content to keep up a one-sided conversation, his words coming out in puffs of steam. Draco listened to him ramble about his holiday, about Christmas at the Weasley's, and about who gave him what and what he gave whom.

They entered Hogsmeade. Happy students wandered around them, laughing and having fun. Some greeted Harry as he passed. Draco followed Harry toward Honeydukes. They stepped inside. Harry grabbed some sweets off the shelves. Draco picked up a chocolate frog and an apple lollipop. They paid and exited the shop. Harry stopped by another store to buy a gift for Teddy. He settled on a big stuffed dog that was enchanted to move its ears and tail.

“Come on,” Harry said.

Together, they crossed the village and exited in the direction of the shrieking shack.

“Where are we going?” Draco asked.

“Somewhere with less people.”

Less was an understatement. The path toward the shrieking shack gleamed with untouched snow. It felt wrong to leave marks on it, but Draco did anyway.

Once they reached a spot with a good view, Harry cleared a patch of the ground from snow with his wand and pulled a blanket from Merlin knows where. He spread it on the ground and gestured for Draco to sit.

Harry plopped down next to him and bit into a piece of treacle fudge. Draco opened his chocolate frog.

“Who'd you get?”

Draco lifted the card. *Harry Potter.*

Harry burst out laughing. After a moment, Draco joined in. Once he started laughing, he couldn't stop. He laughed until he couldn't breathe, hoping Harry wouldn't hear the note of hysteria in his voice.

The knot in his chest seemed to loosen. He was back at Hogwarts with Harry. Everything was alright.

“What does it say about me?” Harry asked, sparks of mirth dancing in his emerald eyes.

“The Boy Who Lived,” Draco read.

“That's not very creative of them!"

“What did you want them to write? ‘Harry Potter, the biggest prat to ever grace the halls of Hogwarts'?” Draco asked.

“No, that's what they would write if *you* got a card.”

“Then what? Harry Potter, potions catastrophe? Harry Potter, the boy who broke every rule at Hogwarts?”

“Draco Malfoy, maker of the best badges in all the wizarding world! Also famous for his song-writing skills and dementor impersonation!”

“Harry Potter, *second*-best seeker in Hogwarts,” Draco smirked.

Harry glared at him playfully.

“Draco Malfoy, the amazing bouncing ferret!”

Low blow.

“Harry Potter, also known as Scarhead, also known as the boy who faints at the sight of dementors.”

“Oh, shut it,” Harry said, throwing a snowball at Draco.

It hit him in the shoulder. Snow dripped down his collar.

“*Potter*!”

Harry doubled over laughing. Draco scooped up a handful of snow and hurled it at Harry.

The two of them ended up engaged in a violent snowball fight, which ended after Draco levitated a pile of snow onto Harry's head, and Harry hit Draco directly in the face.

Draco swore, spitting out a mouthful of snow.

“Sorry!”

Draco didn't care about Harry's apologies. He wanted vengeance. Harry foolishly rushed over to help Draco dust himself off. Draco lunged at him and shoved him to the ground. Harry had time to grab the front of Draco's clothes and pull him down as well. The next few seconds were a competition of who could turn the other into a more convincing snowman.

Finally, both collapsed onto their backs, exhausted.

Draco climbed to his feet, feeling an unpleasant trickle of icy water down his back. He began dusting himself off. Harry followed suit. Draco dumped a few handfuls of snow out from the back of his collar. Harry hadn't fared much better. He was covered head to toe.

Harry pulled off his glasses, which were entirely coated with water, and rubbed them on his shirt. When he lifted them, streaks of water remained. Harry swore under his breath. Draco cleaned them with a flick of his wand.

“Thanks,” Harry said, putting his glasses back on.

Draco graciously refrained from commenting on Harry’s atrocious eyesight.

“You have snow in your hair,” he said instead.

Harry dusted off the top of his head.

“Is it gone?”

“No, there's still some left. May I?”

“Yeah.”

Draco brushed a clump of snow off of Harry's head. Harry's hair was soft under his fingers. For some reason, Draco felt his face heat up.

“Most of it is gone now,” he said, withdrawing his hand.

Harry blinked. Snowflakes stuck to his eyelashes.

“You have snow on your head, too.”

With that, Harry reached up and plucked some snow out of Draco's hair. He had to get up on tiptoes to see what he was doing, putting their faces on the same level. They were so close that Draco could practically feel the warmth radiating off of him.

“Thank you,” Draco said hoarsely. His throat felt very dry all of a sudden.

Harry's eyes shifted from the top of Draco's head to meet his gaze. Draco swallowed.

“I missed you,” Harry whispered.

“I missed you too,” Draco admitted quietly.

It was an understatement. He had missed Harry so much that it had physically hurt. When he woke up from a nightmare, he had made it all the way to his door before remembering that he wasn't at Hogwarts and Harry wouldn't be waiting in the common room. The only thing that had gotten him through the holidays was the memory of Harry’s hand in his. Harry, with such unbridled life in his eyes. Harry, whose touch was the only thing that kept Draco warm. Harry, who had so much life in him that it spilled over and into Draco too. Only next to Harry did he feel complete. He *needed* Harry, and he hated himself for it.

Harry’s eyes got closer and closer. Mesmerizing. Draco couldn't look away. He stayed frozen in place even as Harry's lips met his.

Draco’s mind went completely blank. Harry Potter was kissing him. A tiny voice in the back of his mind screamed for him to do something, but he couldn’t move.

Harry began to pull away. The only semi-coherent thought in Draco’s head was *Don’t you fucking dare, Potter*. His hands found Harry's face, and Draco kissed him back.

The searing heat of Harry's lips burned through Draco, erasing the chill from the day out in the cold. One of his hands found Draco's waist, the other cupped his face. Draco felt Harry's thumb glide over his face, tracing his cheekbones. He buried his hand in Harry's hair, pulling him closer. The only thing in Draco's head was Harry. His smell, the faint taste of treacle fudge lingering on his lips, the softness of his hair under Draco's fingers, the warmth emanating from him like he was a small sun. He eclipsed everything else, until Draco's world was made up of him alone.

They finally broke apart. Draco's heart raced, and his face was burning where Harry had touched it. Harry looked flushed. His eyes glittered, and he was grinning in a dazed way. His lips were reddened from the kiss. Just seeing him made Draco want to kiss him again.

The reality of the situation began to sink in. Draco stared blankly into space, trying to process what had just happened.

“I'm such an idiot! I fucked it all up,” Harry muttered, rummaging through his pockets.

Draco watched Harry retrieve a single white rose that had somehow

remained uncrushed, and hold it out to him.

Harry cleared his throat as a blush crept up his cheeks.

“Draco, will you go out with me?”

Draco wanted to say a million words, ask a million questions, laugh, cry, yell. He did none of that. Harry was looking at him with his open green eyes that betrayed his every thought, his every worry. Under that gaze, Draco’s lips could only form one word.

“Yes.”

His fingers closed around the stem of the rose, and he wanted to cry because *Harry had remembered his favorite flower.*

Their fingers brushed.

“Really?” Harry grinned.

Draco scoffed. *Really*? The git was all that Draco could think about all day, every day, and he had the nerve to ask *really*?

Harry had been throwing glances at Draco all evening, while smiling like a fool. Every time Draco caught him looking, it made him blush. Granger had been looking at them knowingly all evening. Even Weasley seemed to pick up on something strange.

Draco finally decided to just not look at Harry. He stared into his plate. He hadn't eaten much at the manor. At Hogwarts, Harry watched him to make sure he actually ate. Draco threw him a sideways look. Harry met his eyes and grinned his lopsided grin. The same way he had grinned right after they'd…

Draco looked away, feeling a blush rise to his face again. *Fucking hell*! Draco stared at the opposite wall angrily. Stupid Potter. Could he be any more obvious?

When dinner ended, Draco went up to his room and took a long shower. He went to bed, but couldn't fall asleep. The events of the day replayed themselves in his head over and over again. *Stupid. Selfish*. He had let himself stop thinking, without considering what this could mean for Harry. He tossed and turned for a very long time, rehearsing what he had to say tomorrow.

When Draco walked into the common room the next morning, Harry

was waiting. The pure joy on his face when he saw Draco made him feel even worse about what he was about to say. The happiness on Harry's face faded slightly upon seeing Draco's expression.

“We need to talk,” Draco said.

“My room?” Harry suggested in a strained voice.

Draco nodded. When the door shut behind them, he turned to Harry.

“I don't think you've thought this through,” Draco stated.

He forced himself to look Harry in the eye.

“What do you mean?” Harry asked, foot bouncing.

“I'm not sure you fully understand the potential consequences.”

Harry waited for Draco to continue. Draco looked away.

“If this gets out… Your reputation will be ruined. You’ll have tied yourself to a death eater. You don't want that.”

“Are you serious right now?” Harry demanded.

Draco's eyes remained glued to the wall somewhere behind Harry. His room was a mess. His bed was unmade, books and papers were strewn all over his desk–

“Draco.”

Draco looked at him. Harry looked angry. Angry… and something else.

“I'm done with other people telling me what I want. If you think for one second that I'm going to let the fucking Daily Prophet tell me how to feel... I don't care about my reputation!”

“But–”

“No. There's only one thing that truly matters here. Do *you* want this?”

Draco's patience was rapidly running out. He glared at Harry. Harry didn't understand!

“Of course I do, but–”

Harry's lips crashed into his, and the rest of the sentence retreated into the realm of meaningless things. Harry pulled away, determination etched into his features.

"You're not getting rid of me that easily," Harry said, setting his jaw. "I am going to continue to… to be with you until *you* want me to leave, and sod my reputation."

Until Draco wanted him to leave. Like *that* would ever happen.

"You'll be stuck with me for a while, then," Draco said hoarsely.

"Good," Harry grinned.

Their eyes met. One set vivid green, the other dull gray. One belonging to the savior of the wizarding world, the other to a former death eater. A pureblood wizard and a wizard raised by muggles. It seemed like everything in this world separated them, because one was Draco Malfoy and the other was Harry Potter. So many barriers. All of them seemed to crumble before Harry's electrifying gaze. Under that gaze, Draco actually believed that this could work.

Then, Draco finally did something he had wanted to do for a long, long time. He kissed Harry Potter.

Chapter End Notes

We did it.

Okay, look. I know that this is a bit of a cliffhanger ending, but this wasn't intended to be THE end. There WILL be more. Some day. When I have time. I actually started writing this fic years ago, I have a thing where I can't show people my work until I'm DONE. For a while, it was just sitting there until I finally cleaned up what I already have, edited, and posted. There will be a LONG break between this and part two, but I do intend for there to be more. I have ideas and stuff, trust. Plot lines that haven't been wrapped up, and so on.
So, thank you to my readers, and I apologize for the abrupt end. This is the first fic I've ever written and I'm glad you were here to see it.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!